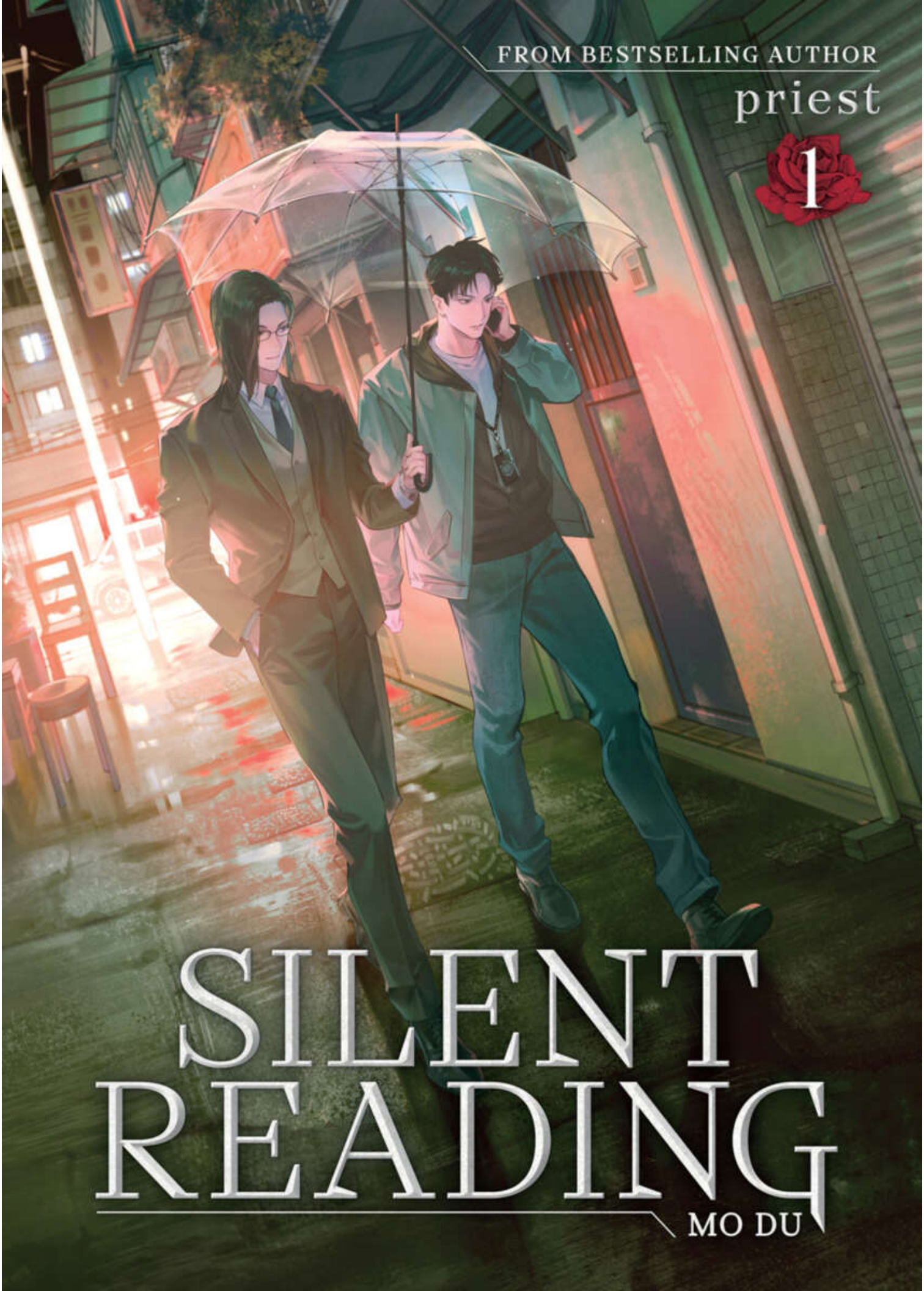
FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
priest
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SILENT READING
MO DU

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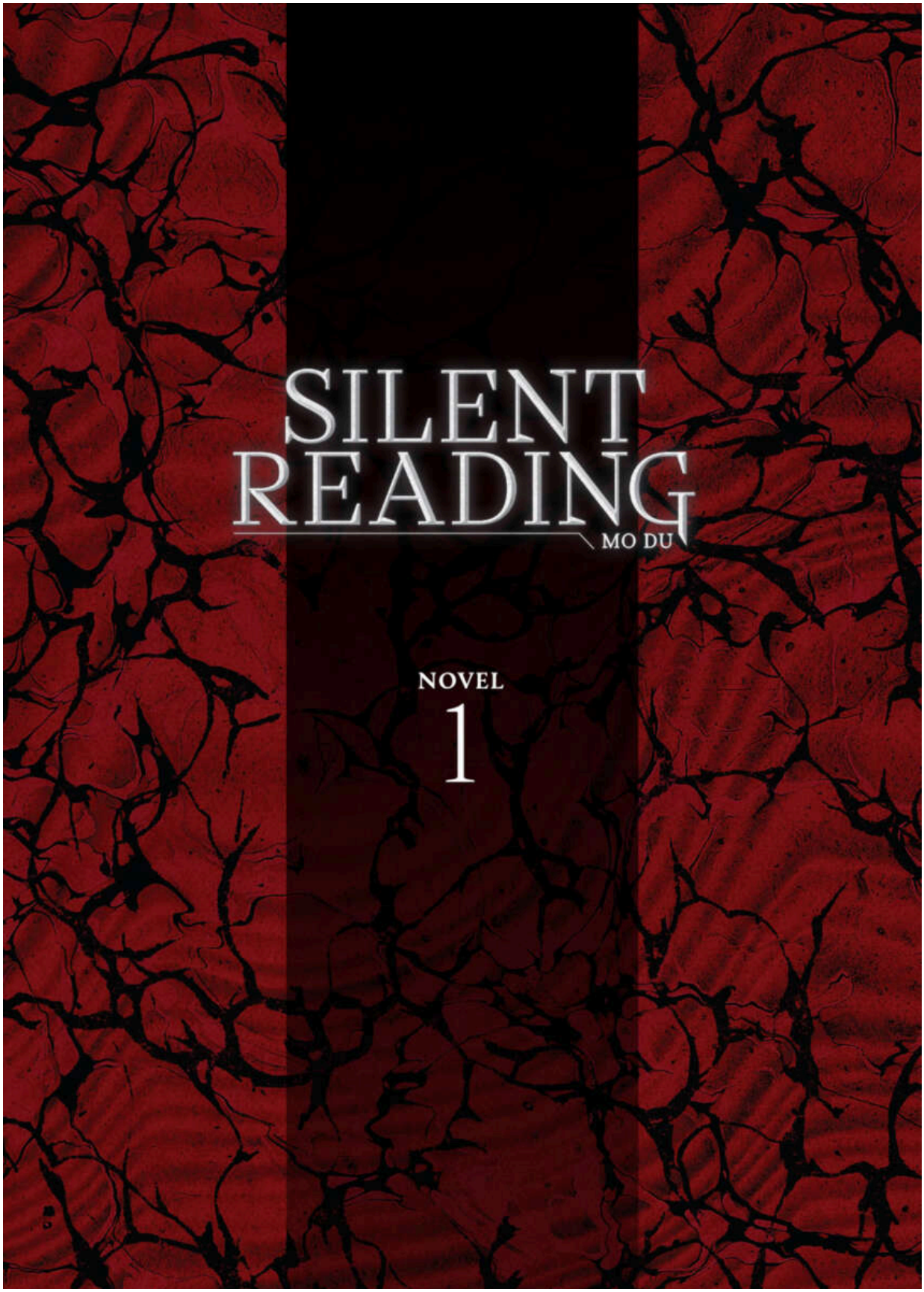
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Seven Seas Entertainment

SILENT READING: MO DU (NOVEL) VOL. 1

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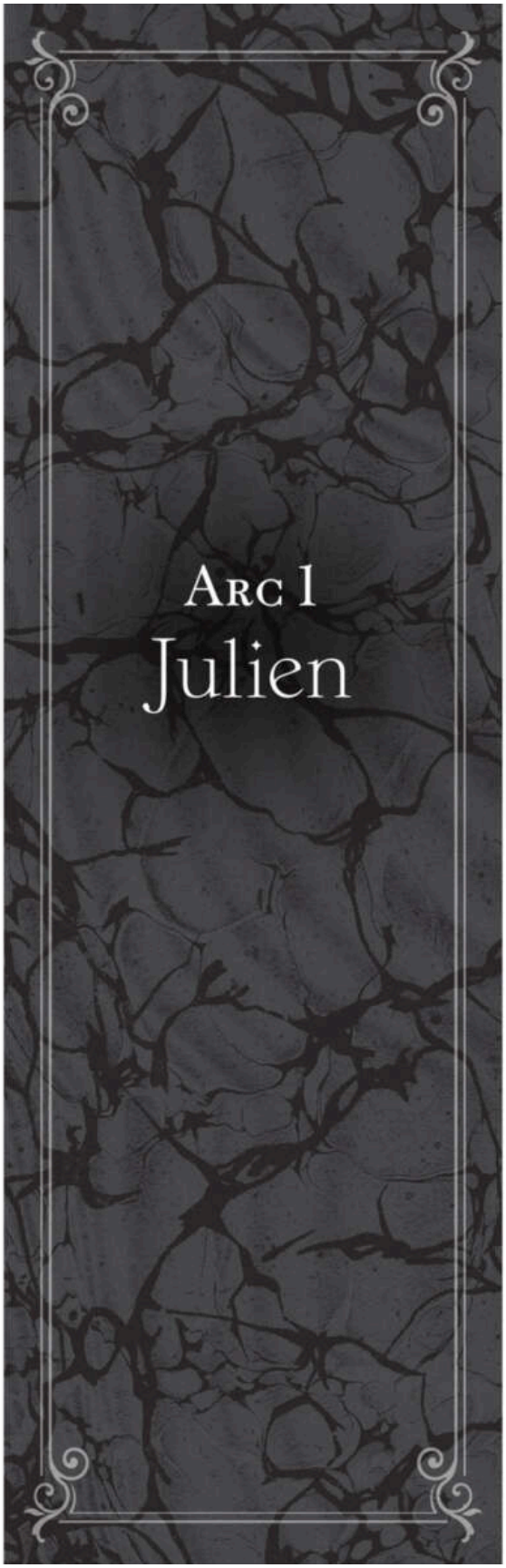
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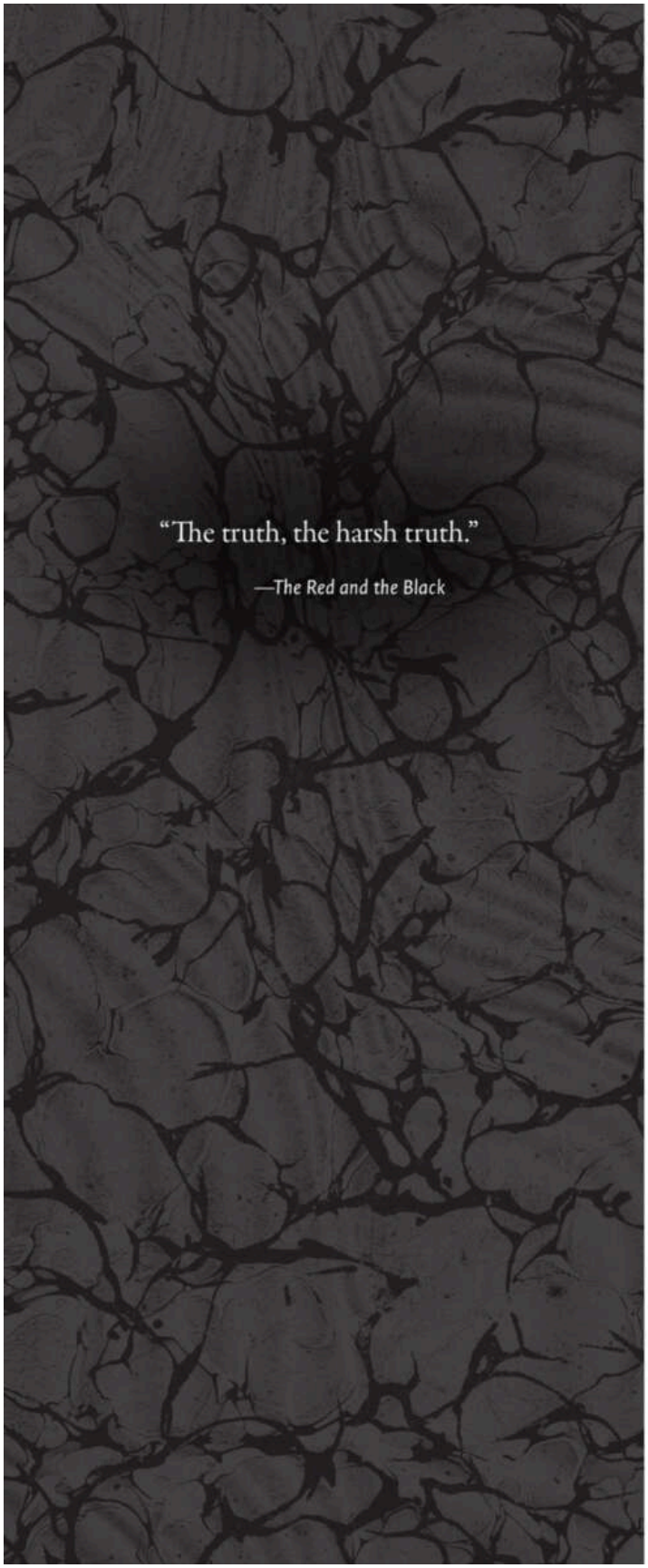
"The truth, the harsh truth."
—The Red and the Black

Chapter 1

THE AREA NORTH of Nanping Boulevard in Huashi, a district within the city of Yancheng, was like a demon with a half-painted face. A wide, straight road split the district clean in two. To the east lay one of the metropolis's most prosperous commercial centers; to the west was the forgotten old town, a gathering place for the poor.

In recent years, real-estate bids on the East Side soared astronomically, and good fortune spilled over into the old town, which was in dire need of redevelopment. Like a boat on a rising tide, however, the cost of demolishing the old-town buildings and relocating their residents climbed too, scaring off several developers and creating division in the narrow, impoverished western streets. Those who dwelt in the hazardous buildings dreamed all day of the sudden wealth their modest square footage of space would bring them. In their hearts, they were already basking in a sense of superiority produced by the millions they'd make once their homes were demolished.

Of course, these "slumdog millionaires" still had to slip on their sandals and line up to empty their chamber pots every day.

This early in the summer, the nights still had a chill to them. The hint of warmth left over from the daylight hours was soon overpowered, and the unlicensed barbecue stalls crowding the western streets furled their banners one by one, admitting defeat. Even the residents enjoying the respite from the summer heat went home early. Occasionally, one of the old streetlights flickered wildly due to the erratic power supply—mostly because the

apartments nearby were siphoning power through illegal lines. Meanwhile, the night had just begun in the bright, bustling area only one road's width away.

In a café on the outskirts of the East Side's commercial center, a barista finally caught her breath after handling a huge wave of customers. Before she could force her smile-stiffened features back to their natural state, however, the little bell above the glass door rang once again. The barista stuck her standard toothy grin back in place. "Welcome."

"One decaf vanilla latte, please."

The customer was a tall, slender young man with hair that fell almost to his shoulders. He wore a severe pressed suit, and thin metal glasses perched on the high bridge of his nose. As he looked down, searching for his wallet, his long locks curled under his chin and veiled part of his face. Exposed to the light, his lips and the bridge of his nose seemed layered with a pale glaze.

No human heart was unmoved by beauty, and the barista couldn't help stealing a few more looks. Guessing at his preferences, she tried to strike up a conversation. "Would you like me to use the sugar-free syrup?"

"No. And *extra* syrup, please."

The customer looked up as he handed over the cash, and his eyes met the barista's. Perhaps out of politeness, he smiled at her. His eyes curved a little behind the lenses of his glasses, and a hint of warmth and flirtatiousness pierced his somber facade. Only then did the barista realize that his good looks weren't the dignified, decent sort; there was a playful, amorous flair to his gaze. She flushed inexplicably and quickly broke eye contact, looking down to punch in his order.

Just then, a delivery man arrived with a shipment for the café. Desperate for a diversion, the barista greeted him loudly and asked him to come around back for the shipment inspection. The delivery man, who was only about twenty, seemed to radiate youth as he bounded into the store, backlit by the glimmer of twilight outside. A dark-skinned man, he grinned widely before booming, “Hello, miss! You look great today! Business must be pretty good, huh?”

The barista was paid a fixed salary every month—she wasn’t really *hoping* that business would boom. When she heard his ridiculous attempt to butter her up, she waved a hand, mildly exasperated. “It’s all right. You can get to work. I’ll bring you a glass of ice water when you’re done.”

Making a bright noise of assent, the young delivery man reached up to wipe sweat from his brow. The small, crescent-shaped scar on his temple made him look like a Justice Bao[1] who’d accidentally shifted his signature birthmark across his head. He moved swiftly, completing the inventory check within the time it took the barista to make her customer’s coffee.

Done with his work, he leaned on the counter and waited for his water. “Hey, miss,” he asked casually, “do you know which building Chengguang Mansion is in?”

“Chengguang Mansion?” The name rang a faint bell for the barista, but she couldn’t place it immediately, so she shook her head. “Not sure. Why?”

“Oh…” The young man looked down slightly and scratched the back of his head with one hand. “It’s nothing. I just heard that they’re hiring delivery drivers there.”

The barista wasn't the perceptive type; she didn't notice his guilty fidgeting. "I'll ask someone for you, then," she responded easily, fitting a lid onto the paper cup for the customer. "Here's your drink, sir. Careful, it's hot."

The customer, who seemed to have a lot of time on his hands at the moment, looked up at the young delivery man. "Chengguang Mansion isn't in the commercial buildings," he drawled. "It's a private members' club behind those. What—are they hiring their own delivery drivers? I'm heading over; want me to show you the way there?"

At last, the barista smelled something fishy. She peered up at the young delivery man with suspicion. "A private club?"

Realizing he'd been seen through, the delivery man pulled a face. He picked up his ice water and inventory list, then dashed off.

***

BEHIND THE EAST SIDE'S glowing commercial center was a man-made green space with attractive scenery. Half a mile in, haughty upscale residences started to appear. They'd been built there deliberately—peace and quiet were only valuable when they were an oasis within hustle and bustle.

The green space was surrounded by places to spend money. They formed concentric rings, their axis *style*. The most expensive spots lay in the inner circle, while cheaper ones were even farther out, closer to other

streets. And the best, most expensive, most *stylish* place of all was Chengguang Mansion.

The owner of Chengguang Mansion wasn't just rich—they were also deeply pretentious. They'd renovated the courtyard in a pseudo-antique style so that, at first glance, it looked like a protected historical building. That renovation work had been completed not long ago, and the mansion's owner had invited their wealthy and prestigious friends to a party so that they could show off the spot. Some were there to network, some to talk business, and some just to show support. More than a few attendees had simply scented a party and followed their noses, happy to use their face or body as an entry ticket. The parking lot was packed with luxury cars of every color. It was a Vanity Fair of ostentatious scope.

Fei Du made his way over on foot, unhurried. He could hear the music and the voices of the people in the courtyard from a great distance. By the time he arrived, he'd finished his sickeningly sweet coffee. Just as he crammed the empty paper cup into a roadside bin, he heard someone whistle the note souring at the end.

"Fei-zong, over here!"

Turning, he saw a group standing nearby—all young people with rich parents and too much time on their hands. Their leader was an exceedingly fashionable young man dripping with accessories. This was Zhang Donglai, one of Fei Du's reprobate friends.

Fei Du strode toward him. "Are you mocking me?"

"Who'd dare?" Zhang Donglai threw an easy arm around Fei Du's shoulders as they walked. "Your car's been here for ages. We've been waiting here too the whole time. Where'd you go? And what's with the

getup? Did you just sign a trade deal with the president of the United States?"

Fei Du didn't even look up. "Shut up."

Very obligingly, Zhang Donglai piped down for a whole minute before his self-restraint shattered. "No, I can't. Looking at you makes me uncomfortable. I feel like I'm walking with someone's dad. How are we going to pull any girls?"

Fei Du's steps paused. He took off his glasses with one finger and hung them on Zhang Donglai's collar, then removed his jacket, rolled up his shirtsleeves, and opened four buttons. His shirt gaped open, the incomprehensible tattoo on his chest peeking out. With one hand, he mussed up his hair; then he grabbed Zhang Donglai's claws of fingers, slipped off three thimble-thick rings, and popped them onto his own hands. "Well, son? This all right?"

Zhang Donglai thought of himself as a worldly man, but Fei Du's instant physical change dazzled even him.

Fei Du led their group of useless rich kids because while everyone else had a father—they were all crown princes, so to speak—Lord Fei had lost his mother at an early age, and he'd barely been an adult when a car accident turned his father into a vegetable. Thus, he'd "taken the throne" before the others, putting him a rank above them: He had all the money he could want and nobody to control him. Naturally, that made Fei Du a force of conspicuous consumption. One saving grace, however, was his lack of interest in playacting as some kind of "business prodigy"—he behaved himself when it came to actual business affairs and never threw his money at dodgy investments for no reason. He only spent money like a wastrel in

his personal life, and there was a limit to how much he could waste that way.

But lately, for whatever reason, he'd stopped coming out to dick around with the clique. Almost as if he was thinking of washing his hands of them.

Fei Du stuck both hands in his pockets and sauntered forward. "Just so you know, I'm only here as a show of support. I'm leaving at midnight."

"Why, Lord Fei…?" Zhang Donglai grumbled. "That's so lame."

"Your idea of fun is vulgar," Fei Du replied airily. "I'm turning over a new leaf."

Vulgar? Zhang Donglai looked at Fei Du's unbuttoned shirt and long hair billowing in the wind. He didn't see much sophistication there.

Hurrying after Fei Du, he asked, "Are you worried about your cop friend nagging you? What's wrong with you, Lord Fei? You're ignoring a whole thick forest for one damn tree you hug all da—"

Fei Du whipped his head around and pinned Zhang Donglai with an icy look. There was a peculiar, contradictory air about Fei Du. When he smiled, he was as charming and seductive as a peach blossom in full bloom. When that smile fell, razor-sharp severity seamlessly took its place, and his gaze turned almost menacing.

Zhang Donglai hesitated, then decided not to finish his sentence. He slapped his own cheek and pretended to spit. "Oops—shouldn't have said that. I'll apologize to Officer Tao for it some other time."

The tension weighing down the corners of Fei Du's mouth finally eased. Waving Zhang Donglai off easily, he graciously turned the page.

Unseen, Zhang Donglai rolled his eyes. *His Lordship's been bewitched by beauty; the kingdom is doomed*.

"Lord Fei" was as good as his word. When midnight came, he left like Cinderella hearing the clock strike twelve. Wending through the crowd of devils and painted faces—and dodging some idiot heartily toasting him with a glass of champagne—he headed to a little grove to look for Zhang Donglai. The idiot behind him yelled drunkenly, "Wealth, power, and a dead dad! Lord Fei, you're the real winner in life!"

"Thanks, but my dad's not dead." Fei Du nodded politely at him, then turned to look into the distance at Zhang Donglai. "Busy?"

Zhang Donglai was discussing the birds and the bees most enthusiastically with a beautiful woman. They both seemed quite indifferent to the presence of others around them. Shameless as he was, the scoundrel answered Fei Du with a whistle. "Join us, Lord Fei?"

"No." Fei Du didn't even slow his pace. "I don't share your appetite. I'm leaving."

He ignored Zhang Donglai hollering behind him and marched swiftly down the cobblestone path. His steps were unwavering, as if he hadn't been drowning in booze all night. In the parking lot, he buttoned his shirt up again and called for a designated driver, then leaned against the trunk of a pagoda tree to wait. At the tail end of spring and beginning of summer, the scent of pagoda tree blossoms always suffused the air in Yancheng. It began in quiet little corners, so faint it could be masked by a single puff of exhaust fumes, but, left to settle without disturbance, the scent built gradually and emerged once again.

In the distance, music from Chengguang Mansion was interspersed with noise and laughter. Fei Du turned back to look, narrowing his eyes. A group of young women were playing a game with a few balding and potbellied, but rich, "pretty boys." Even east of Nanping, most shops were closed at this time of night, and those who came with their cards to rub shoulders and network would've left before midnight. There was a tacit understanding that those who remained were hanging around for the next event: indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh.

Fei Du plucked a few little white blossoms from the tree. He blew the dust off them, then put them in his mouth and slowly chewed as he lazily opened the contact list on his phone. He let his finger hover over "Officer Tao" for a good while, but then—suddenly realizing how late it was—he gave up on it. At first, he stood silently. Then he began to whistle through the floral sweetness of the blossom on his tongue, and a tune gradually took form.

Ten minutes passed. The driver arrived and took Lord Fei's flashy little sports car onto Nanping Boulevard with great trepidation. Fei Du leaned back in the front passenger seat, resting his eyes. An app played an audiobook on his phone's speaker. "*'Incedo per ignes,'* replied Julien," the clear male voice intoned evenly. "'I have hidden enemies.'"[2]

The hired driver was a college student working part-time. He had a healthy hatred of materialism and assumed Fei Du was either a debauched heir to second-generation wealth or some post-surgery Z-list celebrity. When he suddenly heard the audiobook, however, he couldn't resist a bemused glance back at his passenger.

Just then, a car approached from the opposite direction with its high beams on, almost blinding the driver. *Nutjob,* the driver cursed inwardly as he veered instinctively to the side. The searchlight masquerading as a car sped narrowly past. The driver, still dazzled, didn't catch the car's model, so he was regretfully unable to decide whether to say "Do they think being rich makes them better than everyone else?" or "Broke idiots with no decency should just stay off the road."

Then the driver heard a thud.

Turning his head, he saw that his customer's phone had fallen from his loose grasp. Nevertheless, the audio continued. "'…A road does not lose its beauty because thorns grow thick on either side. Continue along it, traveler, and leave those hateful thorns there to wither.'"

Fei Du slept, unconscious of the world around him. As it turned out, he'd been using the audiobook as a sleep aid. The driver looked away expressionlessly. *Tch. So he's a good-for-nothing pretty boy after all,* he thought.

Letting his mind wander, the young driver brought the car steadily down stick-straight Nanping Boulevard in the depths of the night. Meanwhile—after all but forcing the young driver's eyes shut with its high beams—the other car waited until they had long passed each other to shut off those lights, round a bend soundlessly, and smoothly turn into the quiet West Side.

At almost one o'clock, the endlessly flickering streetlight finally passed on. A stray cat jumped onto the wall to survey its domain. Suddenly, all its fur stood on end, and it let out a piercing yowl.

Weak rays of moonlight hit the ground, illuminating a man's face. It was so swollen and puffy that the man would've been unrecognizable if not for a crescent-shaped scar on his temple. A piece of roughly torn blank paper covered his forehead like a talisman to ward off corpse reanimation. He lay on the ground, limbs splayed.

He was dead.

The stray cat was so alarmed that it slipped and slid off the low wall. When it landed, it rolled across the ground and darted away without looking back.

Chapter 2

YANCHENG MUNICIPAL Public Security Bureau, 8:00 a.m.

Staff from various departments filed in for work. Yawning, Xiao-Sun—the support employee from the admin office—lugged a water dispenser refill jug over to the chief's office. He pushed the door open and found Director General Zhang on the phone, holding his first tea of the day. He had a grave look on his face.

Zhang Chunjiu, the bureau's longtime director general, was a wiry man in his fifties, a no-nonsense old relic. The weathered man carried his own tea with him wherever he went. Aside from his work cell, the only mobile device he used was a dumbphone with a battery life of more than two weeks per full charge. He never dressed casually at work, instead switching between several uniforms year-round. A deep groove sat between his eyebrows, and he rarely smiled.

The ancient landline in Zhang Chunjiu's office had a leaky speaker. As Xiao-Sun crouched to open the packaging on the water jug, he heard a voice crackle through the static. "Yes sir. I know that, since it happened in my jurisdiction, it was a dereliction of duty on my part. But…"

Xiao-Sun's heart clenched as he peeked at Director General Zhang's inseparably knit brows. *What's gone wrong at a crucial time like this?*

The city of Yancheng was in the middle of organizing an extremely important international summit. Leaders and journalists from various countries were present. Several businesses and schools were closed for the occasion, driving private vehicles within the capital was restricted based on

whether their license plates ended with an odd or even number, and every department involved in public security was on high alert.

The old director general forced a calm tone, but as Xiao-Sun watched, a storm began to brew above his neck. “Nanping Boulevard North is less than two miles from the summit venue. As I said during our discussion, *nothing* can go wrong this month, no matter what. It’s best that even the roadside stalls be cleared away. And now you’ve come to me with a murder case? You’ve truly exceeded expectations, Lao-Wang.”

“But, Director General, it was late at night—”

“The order to step up night patrols was conveyed to all units a month in advance. Do you think criminals work a strict nine-to-five?”

“Yes—of course you’re right. And I don’t mean to dodge responsibility for this. But you know West Huashi has always been a mess, and we get so many people from out of town—”

After five minutes of patient back-and-forth with the head of the Huashi District Bureau, Director General Zhang realized the man was still rebutting everything he said without a hint of remorse. His temper flared abruptly. “Cut the crap!” he roared with the force of his accumulated ire. “Isn’t the West Side under your jurisdiction? Isn’t it your territory? Now you tell me it’s a mess, so what the hell have you been doing there all this time?!”

This outburst silenced the district bureau director on the line; Xiao-Sun remained silent as well.

Director General Zhang took a drink of his tea to calm himself, only to accidentally sip up some dregs. He spat the mouthful back into the cup. Then, extending a single vicious finger, he stabbed out the word

strangulation on his dusty keyboard, and newspaper cuttings and screenshots archived on the bureau's intranet flooded the screen.

In the small hours of the morning, the gruesome corpse of an adult male had been discovered lying in an alley in the West Side of Huashi. The news was initially posted online as one of those "strange-but-true" local tabloid stories—but of course, with the internet full of such creepy tales, it hardly made a splash. Then the head of the Huashi District Bureau, terrified of something going wrong at this pivotal moment, did something incredibly stupid: He tried to hush it up. First he insisted that the post be deleted, then suspiciously claimed that the bureau had found the body of some random vagrant who'd died of unknown causes, which only drew more attention to the matter.

To his surprise, the rascals who'd first found the body had been shutterbugs; they'd taken clear photos of the crime scene, and they posted them in a most sensational way. Paired with the secretive nature of the district bureau's previous communiqués, this fired up the imaginations of citizens as they rode buses and trains to school and work during their rush-hour commute. What began as an insignificant little news item caught fire and spread throughout the whole city until even the municipal council phoned specifically to ask about it.

Director General Zhang put on his reading glasses and selected the post the most people had clicked on prior to its deletion. Its title, *Suspected Steal-and-Strangle Gang Terrorizes City*, was clearly phrased to be tantalizing clickbait. The post came with photographic evidence to boot. The moment he opened it, an uncensored image of a dead body filled his screen for maximum shock value.

Director General Zhang was truly lost for words. He wondered whether he should've saved his earlier bellowing for this moment instead. Then again, age limited his vocal abilities anyway. Forced to resume his regular volume, he told the head of the Huashi District Bureau, "Your talents are wasted in this line of work. You should be in advertising. Look how effectively you managed to spread this."

"It's those interfering brats who incited this! Who takes a selfie with a corpse? They have no conscience at all! But don't you worry, sir. They're all in my custody, and the posts and photos are being deleted as we speak. I can get everything under control."

Director General Zhang leaned back in his seat, massaging his temples. "The important thing right now is to investigate the death as soon as possible. If there's a murderer, catch them; if there's some other criminal involved, arrest them. What's the point of deleting posts? Are you an app moderator? Hurry up and settle this, and make sure your officers keep their mouths shut. I'm going to send some of my people over from the city bureau to provide technical expertise. If you haven't sorted this out one week from now, Wang Hongliang, you can hand in your resignation and get lost!"

Done spewing venom at the district bureau director, Director General Zhang hung up. Xiao-Sun put the empty water jug to one side and picked up the small notebook he always carried. He was getting a feeling that the old director general would have something to say.

Sure enough, Director General Zhang gestured to him. "Get the criminal investigation team in here."

Xiao-Sun looked up. "All of them, sir?"

Director General Zhang's gaze turned back to the LCD monitor before him. The corpse in the photo had already swelled hideously, distorting its features—but those features still recognizably belonged to a young man. His glassy eyes faced the viewer, and his mouth gaped open as if in shock.

"Of course not. How would they fit in the room? Get Luo Wenzhou. Ask him to head over there with a few of his men. Maybe the case won't be that complicated. Tell him I'll take care of that old Wang Hongliang after this month. He'll know what to do."

Xiao-Sun hesitated. Director General Zhang directed a quizzical gaze at him through his glasses.

"S-sir…" Xiao-Sun forced a smile. "Sergeant Luo… He, uh, isn't in yet."

***

LUO WENZHOU ALWAYS SAUNTERED into work exactly on time and not a moment earlier. As long as he hadn't been given a different shift, his working hours began at 8:30, so he'd never have been caught there at 8:29. His car wasn't allowed on the road today due to the license plate restrictions in effect, and he didn't want to squeeze onto public transport, so Luo Wenzhou had dug out a museum-worthy twenty-eight-inch-wheel bicycle from the basement, fixed it up himself, and then biked down the road, wobbling all the way.

He had a very handsome face—so handsome it almost made him look youthful. Still, his expression and demeanor betrayed his maturity. He wore earphones, and his button-down shirt—rolled up at the sleeves—faintly outlined the muscles beneath. Even on the large frame of the vintage twenty-eight-inch-wheel bike, his long legs easily reached the ground. Bags dangled from the handlebars, the left holding a dozen jianbing and the right six or seven cups of soy milk. Both his hands just barely resting on the dangerously overloaded handlebars, Luo Wenzhou steered his way through the bureau's front gates exactly on time.

As he entered, Luo Wenzhou noticed the security guard stopping a flower delivery girl from entering.

"No, you can't go in. Why? This is a police station, miss, not Flower Fruit Mountain,[3] understand? All deliveries must be left in the mailroom to be inspected and registered."

"How can I leave fresh flowers in the mailroom? What if they wilt from poor handling?" The girl turned as she spoke; spotting Luo Wenzhou on his bike, she pointed at him indignantly. "If I can't go in, how come that delivery guy can?"

The security guard paused. Luo Wenzhou grinned flirtatiously at the girl, his white teeth gleaming. "Because this delivery guy is tall and handsome."

"…Good morning, Sergeant Luo," said the security guard, inwardly weeping for the bureau's image.

"Morning. Had breakfast? If you haven't, grab some." Luo Wenzhou remained on the bike, one foot planted on the ground. "Who are the flowers

for, miss? I can take them in for you.”

Only then did the girl realize her mistake. Feeling awkward, she searched anxiously for the little card. “Oh,” she said in a low voice. “They’re for a-a Mr. Tao Ran from the criminal investigation team.”

***

AT 8:30 SHARP, Luo Wenzhou punctually entered the office and tossed the flowers onto Tao Ran’s desk. “Your—” he began.

But the livid Director General Zhang had sent someone down to fetch Luo Wenzhou, and that individual's arrival forced Luo Wenzhou to swallow the rest of his words. Instead, he simply pressed a heavy hand onto Tao Ran's desk and said, "We'll discuss the way you handle your personal affairs later."

The entire criminal investigation team was stunned. They stared in shock at the bouquet of clean, fresh flowers in front of Officer Tao Ran, looking as if they believed that a time bomb was buried somewhere under the stems.

Officer Lang Qiao pulled a magnifying glass and a pair of disposable gloves from her drawer. She leaned over to the neighboring desk cautiously and examined the bouquet, extracting a perfumed card made of brown cardstock. The crowd watched as the brave girl solemnly opened the card. Inside she found the following words, written in the most standard and regular script: *The wind is furious, but while my hands and feet are frozen stiff, my heart is warm. It always feels so soft and tender, though I don't know why. I want to be close to you, yet not so much that I suffer for it.*[4]

"It's signed 'Fei,'" said Lang Qiao. "Who's that?"

Tao Ran snatched the card back from her. "Stop messing around. Give it to me."

"After all that, it was just a gift from your girlfriend." Lang Qiao patted her chest, then added, brashly mischievous, "What a fright! I thought our boss Sergeant Luo was confessing his love for you in front of everyone. That would've been worth a headline in the society column."

All around them, their coworkers calmed down as well. Everyone in the group was single, and they swiftly recovered enough of their wits to

split up the breakfast Luo Wenzhou had delivered as they dutifully castigated the “heretic” Tao Ran.

“When did you split off from us, Deputy Tao? Did you notify anyone? Did the organization approve it?”

“Taotao, where’s your sense of team spirit? How disappointing.”

“Deputy Tao, I only have thirty-seven sixty left of this month’s salary. I don’t have enough left to pay for admission to some romantic flower show, so proceed accordingly.”

“Go! Get lost!” Tao Ran tucked the card away, then found an inconspicuous corner to hide the flowers in. “What girlfriend? Stop this nonsense.”

As his colleagues heard his attempts to fool them while the evidence stared everyone in the face, they erupted into jeers, advancing as one to corner their deputy sergeant.

Just as things were really heating up, though, Luo Wenzhou returned from his hurried retreat. He pushed the door open and walked in, slapping the doorframe. “Homicide case in Huashi. I need two of you to come with me pronto.”

Chapter 3

THE AREA AROUND Nanping Boulevard was a rush-hour disaster zone, typically congested from six thirty in the morning to ten at night. The road was full of a hodgepodge of upper-class white-collar workers heading east to the business district and people on motorbikes weaving through traffic. A large bus chugging slowly down the street to lodge itself into the mix would have produced the standstill of a century.

Roads on the West Side were especially convoluted, with wide lanes and narrow alleys crisscrossing haphazardly. It was also something of a trend for locals to erect unauthorized structures wherever they liked, which meant there were random dead ends everywhere. A misdirected vehicle that headed down one of those streets would find itself trapped like a bug in a spider's web, forced to struggle along left and right turns before it could free itself and see the metaphorical light of day again.

Luo Wenzhou stuck his head out the car window. He let the siren blare for a moment, then yelled, "Hey, mister, we're on official business here, and we can't get past. Mind moving that BMW at the gate?"

An old man emerged from a small single-story house nearby. Pursing his lips, he gave Luo Wenzhou a look, then pushed the offending mobility scooter off the street and into the yard with trembling arms. A sticker on the left side of the scooter read *Designated for Grandkid Pickup*, and a sticker on the right read *The more you honk, the slower I go! I win!*

As the man plodded inside, Luo Wenzhou heard a loud woof. Puzzled, he lifted his sunglasses off the bridge of his nose and saw that a

large yellow dog had run out from behind the scooter. The dog approached the side of the police car, met Luo Wenzhou's eyes, and lifted its hind leg unmistakably toward the car tire.

Luo Wenzhou whistled. "Piss, little darling," he said amiably, "and I'll cut off your tiny wiener to make braised huibing noodles."

The hound had never heard of such a bizarre method of consumption, and it was thoroughly unnerved by Officer Luo, who had the air of a seasoned scoundrel. With a yelp, the dog ran away, tail between its legs.

Lang Qiao hid her face behind a tablet. "Boss, did you forget that you have an unmarried young lady in your back seat? The district bureau sent over all the details they've got, by the way."

"In that case, may I trouble my easily forgotten female comrade for an objective, unbiased summary of those details?" Luo Wenzhou asked, easing the car out of the narrow alley. "Ignore the subjective parts for now. Wang Hongliang is a bootlicking bastard, and the rest of the Huashi District Bureau are made in his image. They're all useless."

"The deceased is He Zhongyi, male, eighteen years of age," Lang Qiao began. "He was a laborer from out of town, working as a delivery guy for a chain of cafés. Grooves and indentations were found in his neck. Cause of death: asphyxiation… So he was strangled. Preliminary conjecture is that the murder weapon was a long strip of something cloth-like. The time of death is estimated to have been between eight and eleven last night. Everything else is pending confirmation from forensics… Oh, and the body was found just a little ways from the back of the deceased's shared accommodations. That's how they identified him so quickly."

Luo Wenzhou was a capable driver. Despite the hazards that surrounded them, he navigated the tight alley with absolute precision, and even had spare brain cells to ask, “Where did that rumor about a steal-and-strangle gang come from?”

“It seems like it started because all the victim’s valuables were taken. His phone was gone, and they found his wallet empty next to him. But it’s hard to say whether it was the murderer who took them.” Lang Qiao scanned the email again. “Right—also, the individual who reported the body stated that there was a piece of paper on the deceased’s face. It was taped to his hair, and the word ‘money’ was written on the underside.”

Tao Ran turned off the GPS. “Turn right, and we’re there.”

“Okay.” Luo Wenzhou rapped the steering wheel. “This case is under the district bureau, not the municipal one. Do you know why they want us there?”

“For guidance and supervision?” Lang Qiao suggested tentatively.

“Know who *used* to get sent out to ‘guide and supervise’?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

Two dots connected in Lang Qiao’s head. “Eunuchs!”

In the front passenger seat, Tao Ran turned to glare at her.

“Is that how young women from your village think?” Luo Wenzhou clenched his jaw as if he had a toothache. “Buzz off. I’m being serious. Director Gen Zhang’s a few years from retirement, and his deputies are all around his age. Everyone else is either too inexperienced or, like Director Zeng, too obsessed with their niche to care about anything else. Chances are that, when Director Gen Zhang goes, they’ll bring people in from the

district bureaus." Luo Wenzhou swerved around a trash heap at the side of the road and lowered his voice. "I suspect the old man wants to get rid of idiots like Wang Hongliang before he retires, so the bureau won't be stuck with someone brainless as head when the time comes. So do you know what our main task is now…?"

As he asked that question, he rounded the corner. There, amid the shoddy old apartment blocks and the uneven thicket of single-story houses, was a patch of utterly barren land. Located right behind a row of small, unauthorized warehouses, it was overgrown with weeds and contained few traces of human life. Puddles pooled at the bases of the surrounding walls, and a persistent, perpetual stench filled the air.

The police had secured the crime scene, and forensic staff were rushing in and out. Wang Hongliang, the head of the Huashi District Bureau, had taken charge of the scene himself and begun to await Luo Wenzhou's team. He was well aware that his visitors weren't going to be friendly toward him.

Wang Hongliang was a middle-aged man whose bald spot extended all the way to his forehead. His eyebrows were so sparse that their furrowing was barely discernable. Hot sweat dripped from his forehead as he greeted Luo Wenzhou with a three-pump handshake. "I'm really sorry about all this—I mean, alarming the director general and forcing you fine people to come all the way down here."

Luo Wenzhou tugged him forward by the hand and patted his shoulder, smiling good-humoredly. "Come on, Laoge, what are you talking about? You can drop the formalities with me."

Wang Hongliang was far better at networking than actual work. Hearing Luo Wenzhou's tone, he went with the flow immediately, calling Luo Wenzhou "brother" as well as he proceeded to unload all sorts of grievances onto his newest family member. Luo Wenzhou pulled out a box of cigarettes and lit one for Wang Hongliang, simultaneously shooting Tao Ran a look that told him to check out the crime scene with Lang Qiao.

Wang Hongliang began with casual chitchat that lasted the length of a cigarette, asking after Luo Wenzhou's entire family before getting down to business. "It was someone he knew—it had to be," he said, his beady little eyes flicking all over the place. He gestured at the crime scene. "Look at this place. It's a maze. An outsider could never find their way through it. Who'd dare commit a murder here? You're the expert, Laodi—don't you think I'm right?"

Luo Wenzhou knew that this was a sensitive time and the last thing Wang Hongliang wanted was a mugger-murderer roaming his jurisdiction, hence his blind insistence on the "acquaintance with a personal motive" narrative. He took off his sunglasses and hooked them on his collar, squinting in the direction of the busy forensics team. "Me, an expert?" he asked lightly, rather than responding to Wang Hongliang's question. "I'm just the son of a public servant, here so I can pay my bills. I trust your expertise."

Wang Hongliang sighed and spread his hands. "Who isn't here to pay their bills, huh? Come on. Let's go take a look."

This new duo of bill-payers walked together into the crime scene, where they found a young man with a flattop and glasses enthusiastically giving Tao Ran and Lang Qiao a primer on the case. Tall and acne-ridden,

the young man held himself ramrod straight, which conspired with his thin frame to make him look like a humanoid coffin. He spoke at a terrifying speed.

"This is Xiao Haiyang, or Xiao-Xiao as we call him. He's new," Wang Hongliang explained, pointing at the young man. "He was a star student—got the top grade on our written exam. Xiao-Xiao, this is Sergeant Luo from the municipal bureau."

Xiao Haiyang puffed out his chest and lifted his chin as if Wang Hongliang had barked "ten-hut!" He nodded stiffly at Luo Wenzhou, his jaw tight, with no trace of a smile. "Sergeant Luo," he greeted the man laconically.

"Take it easy," Luo Wenzhou said with a wave. "Please continue."

This seemed to flip a switch inside the taciturn Xiao Haiyang. A deluge of words instantly poured from his lips, drowning everyone in front of him. Each syllable barreled out after the last with preternatural speed; no one with less than a college-level understanding of Mandarin Chinese could possibly have followed him. "The deceased lacks injuries consistent with struggle, but there are signs of blunt force trauma to the back of his head, so our preliminary conclusion is that he was struck unconscious from behind, strangled with a soft strip of cloth until he died, and then had his valuables stolen and that paper placed on his forehead. If the deceased suffocated while unconscious, there wouldn't have been any signs of struggle. As for the cord or cloth that strangled him, as well as the blunt object that struck his head, we haven't yet found them, nor any conclusive evidence demonstrating that this was in fact where the crime took place. Report concluded!"

As soon as Xiao Haiyang finished his final sentence, Wang Hongliang turned green. “Are you implying something you don’t have evidence to back up? If the murder didn’t take place here, then where did it happen? You’re saying this body was dumped? Why would they dump it here? What would be the point? Don’t run your mouth and confuse everyone with your random guesses, Xiao Haiyang!”

Xiao Haiyang stared at him, confused. “I’m just saying it’s a possibility—”

Wang Hongliang was on the verge of another outburst when Luo Wenzhou reached out to stop him. “Kids always get ideas when they’re new to the job. Don’t worry. Let him talk,” he said, lifting his gaze to survey their surroundings.

Huashi’s West Side gave off a gloomy, gray feeling. Overhead, heavy electric wires crisscrossed chaotically, dividing Yancheng’s rare sunny sky into jagged shards and bearing down on the people below. It was incredibly oppressive. “Ask around. Maybe someone heard or saw something,” Luo Wenzhou continued. “I do think your broad direction is accurate, Director Wang. Let’s not jump to extreme scenarios just yet. We’ll investigate under the assumption that the perpetrator was familiar to the victim. What do you think, Laoge?”

Wang Hongliang found his new brother’s way of speaking and handling matters highly satisfactory, and the quick agreement they reached saved much time on communication. Next would come endless inspections and questionings, all menial work for low-level district bureau officers, unconnected to “technical expertise.” The primary task for Luo Wenzhou’s team of three was now to return to the district bureau office, sit, and drink

tea while checking on the work periodically until Wang Hongliang slipped up.

At that point, Tao Ran said quietly to Luo Wenzhou, “You go ahead. I want to check out this area with the others.”

Tao Ran’s name was gentle,[5] like a girl’s. His facial features were similarly elegant, and his temper pleasant; he’d never lost it with anyone before. Despite being among such coarse colleagues, he never cursed like they did. He was well-mannered with friends and foes alike. But Luo Wenzhou knew Tao Ran: He had a seriousness and stubbornness that seemed to belong to a different time. He didn’t care about politics at all—after all, if the sky fell, Luo Wenzhou would be there to take care of it—but when it came to cases, he pursued any suspicions he held to the very end, regardless of whether he was responsible for doing so.

Luo Wenzhou hummed for a moment. “The deceased was struck unconscious from behind and lost the ability to move. He likely didn’t even see his attacker. So, if this really was a robbery, the suspect wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of strangling him. That makes the likelihood of a personal motive strong. Wang Hongliang’s basic deductions make sense. But what’s wrong?”

The victim’s body, which had already been bagged, was being carried away by the forensics team. Tao Ran followed them with his eyes. “The shoes,” he said softly. “Look. This place is filthy—no one cleans it up. One stray step would cover your shoe in mud. But when I opened the body bag and checked, the kid’s shoes were perfectly clean.”

Luo Wenzhou raised an eyebrow.

“Of course, it could also just be that he lives in the area and knows it well enough to avoid dirty spots,” said Tao Ran. “But I think Little Four-Eyes from the district bureau is right: We can’t take for granted that this is where the crime began. The paper stuck on the victim’s face is strange too. Wenzhou, if this case turns out not to be straightforward, I think Director Wang will rush through it to get it over with instead of investigating properly.”

“You think?” Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Yes, he’s obviously trying to do that.”

So long as he had a general idea of who the suspect might’ve been, Wang Hongliang could promptly issue an official announcement declaring that the case was likely motivated by personal grudges, not a terrifying “steal-and-strangle gang” like the online rumors said. Without that hook, the public would forget all about the crime within a few days. Once everything was over, they could even say, “The Huashi District Bureau made an extraordinary contribution to the municipal organization of the Whatever Summit.”

As for the case, they’d just send out a few low-level detectives who would take their time investigating. If they found the perpetrator, they would apprehend them; if not, the bureau would just suppress, suppress, suppress—possibly to the point of designating it a cold case and closing it.

That was how Wang Hongliang did things—which was why Director General Zhang was targeting him specifically.

“Whatever the reason, this boy came all the way to our city and died away from home,” said Tao Ran. “We owe it to him to come up with an

explanation.” Luo Wenzhou turned his head and held Tao Ran’s gaze for a couple of seconds.

“I’m just going to take a look for my own peace of mind,” Tao Ran added quickly. “I promise I won’t cause any issues.”

Luo Wenzhou laughed. “Even when you have, I’ve cleaned up after you all these years. But you’ve never offered me your body as compensation.”

Tao Ran snorted, unconcerned. “Oh, shut up,” he chuckled.

As he started to walk off, Luo Wenzhou stopped him. “Wait. Was it Fei Du who sent you flowers this morning?”

“Who else has that much free time?” Tao Ran answered indifferently, and continued to leave.

Luo Wenzhou stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced down at his own feet as if searching for the right words. “Fei Du isn’t someone you should get too close with… You know what I mean?”

Tao Ran’s steps paused. His delicate, slender figure made him look easy to bully, which was why he always wore his uniform both in the office and out in the field. The morning sun shone over the low, mossy walls, softly gilding his silhouette. “I do,” he told Luo Wenzhou, growing solemn. “But I’ve been watching him for the last seven years. I understand him.”

Luo Wenzhou remained silent.

“He can be a little wild sometimes, but he isn’t who you think he is.” At this point, Tao Ran’s tone abruptly changed. “You know, I wonder who was so shy about giving him presents that he had to do it anonymously.

Who *was* it who worked so hard to get a gaming console from abroad, then told me to—”

“Fuck off,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted expressionlessly. “Shut up and go do your job!”

Chapter 4

"I SAW THE NEWS TOO! Heard it was really close to our place. Is that true?"

"Yeah! It happened right across Nanping Boulevard, just a little way out. I go that way sometimes when I'm heading back to my parents' place and don't want to cross the bridge. I always thought it was a dodgy area, but who knew—ah!"

The two young office workers were gossiping so enthusiastically in the kitchen that they initially didn't notice that someone behind them was listening to a livestream. One of them was so startled that her hands flinched, and she almost poured a whole cup of hot water onto the floor as if it were an offering.

"Careful." Fei Du reached out to steady the base of her cup, then took it from her grasp and set it to one side. "Don't pour such hot water. Girls' hands are so delicate. What if you scalded yourself?"

Fei Du rarely spoke loudly to anyone, and the things he said were quite normal. Yet when words left his mouth, they instantly warped, acquiring a subtly intimate undertone. That often led others to misread him as interested in them. Fortunately, Fei Du usually left immediately after he spoke, which gave those illusions a chance to fall apart.

"Fei-zong, you scared me!" Although the girls had initially started in alarm, they quickly relaxed upon seeing that it was him. "Fei-zong" was a chairman in name, but compared to his father—the authoritative erstwhile Director Fei—second-generation heir Fei Du was simply a likable mascot.

Though he was well-known as an idle, rich playboy, he played around very scrupulously; he never brought his hedonistic private life to the office with him. The veneer of steadiness he adopted at work was enough for him to steer clear of any trouble.

In the eyes of ordinary staff, young Fei-zong seemed to exercise his powers in the company rarely, and seldom appeared to carry out any duties either. He did occasionally tease the girls at work, but he kept it to what was appropriate; he was fiercely against "dipping his pen in the company ink," so he never crossed the line. He was also emotionally intelligent and good-natured, so nobody was afraid of him.

Fei Du wiped up the spilled water with a paper towel, then returned the cup to its owner. "What news were you two discussing just now?" he asked offhandedly.

"That robbery and murder case in the West Side yesterday. They haven't caught the culprit yet, apparently. Maybe we should send a mass HR email to remind everyone to be cautious when they're arriving at and leaving work."

"Good idea," Fei Du agreed solemnly. "Or we could give everyone time off until the perpetrator's caught. Work isn't nearly as important as your safety, after all."

The girls knew he was just talking nonsense, but they were still so charmed by his words that they practically skipped back to their duties. Fifteen minutes later, Fei Du strolled into his own office. Sure enough, he'd received a company-wide email from Human Resources.

To the thin layer of coffee in his cup, he added half a cup of hazelnut chocolate syrup, drowning every molecule of caffeine in sugar. He stirred

the syrup in and, in the absence of anything else to do, clicked on the video attached to the email.

"A horrible crime took place last night behind these residential blocks on the West Side of Huashi. As of now, the police have yet to make any official statement on the offense. Sources familiar with the case say that the victim, Mr. He, lived in shared accommodations near the scene of the crime…"

The video was from an online news publisher called *Sensation*. After another two minutes of disingenuously grave narration, there came a sudden commotion from somewhere out of frame. Smelling blood in the water, the shaky camera hastily focused on a nearby food stall.

The first thing the camera settled on was a middle-aged woman in an apron, probably the stall owner. She was scowling and jostling a young man. "You little brat!" she exclaimed. "Can't you do math? Or do you just not have a conscience? That greedy over a few bucks… What'll you do with that money, huh? Buy your mother's coffin?"

Some older folks with plenty of free time on their hands were eating wontons at the illegal stall. They had rather sharp tongues, and not even their continual eating and drinking could disrupt their loud observations. Now they faced the camera to issue their dutiful commentary.

"The boy was buying shaobing. She asked him to put the money in the basket and then count out his own change. It's an honor system, see? Guess what?! He gave her ten yuan, then took *fifteen* from the change basket. I saw it. Eating five yuan's worth and taking five yuan's worth, what a deal—he'll be a millionaire soon enough!"

“He needs a beating, if you ask me. They say sticky-fingered youngsters grow up into drug dealers and murderers, you know. The police in our area…? I hate to say it, but after sunset, everyone’s scared to even walk around outside. I think it’s all the fault of guys like that boy—riffraff who come here from out of town.”

“We’ve complained so many times, but nobody ever does anything about it. And now someone’s dead! What did I tell you?”

Once the elderly think tank got going, they were quick and highly effective at exacerbating disagreements. Hearing the running commentary behind her, the stall owner felt that she had the moral high ground. The flames of her rage shot seven feet high, past her head, as she lashed out at the boy physically too. The thieving teen covered his head with both hands and silently curled into a ball, shielding himself. His exposed neck and ears, however, were so red that they looked like they could start bleeding at any moment.

A few less bloodthirsty bystanders couldn’t stand this sight for long. They came forward to separate the violent stall owner and the kid, but found themselves quickly sucked into a brawl instead. In the blink of an eye, the conflict escalated into an altercation between West Side locals and tenants from out of town. It was impossible to tell who was in the right, and the scene quickly descended into chaos. The camera was jostled three or four separate times.

Fei Du finished stirring his coffee. This sort of trivial small-neighborhood squabble bored him; it didn’t seem worth watching at all. He decided to close the clip.

Suddenly, someone in the video shouted, “The cops are here!”

But this was an internal disagreement among civilians, so the police couldn't just throw themselves into the fray. After a short scuffle, a few uniformed officers began squeezing through the crowd, trying to break the tightly packed group apart. To their surprise, they were quickly overwhelmed by the sea of people. One officer even had his glasses smacked off his face.

Among the unfortunate peacekeepers, Fei Du caught sight of a familiar figure. His hand paused over the exit button.

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THAT AFTERNOON, in the Huashi District Bureau, Wang Hongliang announced that he had a meeting and took off like a rocket, leaving the handling of the fight's aftermath to Luo Wenzhou.

With his hands clasped behind his back, Luo Wenzhou bent down and peered closely into Tao Ran's face. "Even back when we helped the narcotics boys on that drug bust and got caught in the crossfire for twenty minutes, I don't think anyone sustained heavy injuries, and now look at you."

Some martial hero's Nine Yin White Bone Claw strike[6] had left a gash on Officer Tao's chin.

"I just *knew* that you guys would get into trouble as soon as you left my line of sight," Luo Wenzhou continued. "When you go home tonight, remember to get a rabies shot."

While questioning neighbors about the He Zhongyi case, the district bureau officers had come across a street brawl. The catalyst, it seemed, had been a young worker's theft of five yuan from a little stall; that had erupted into a huge fight that absorbed even the officers who came to stop it. Now the people involved had all been hauled to the district bureau, and everything was a mess. The brawlers remained primed for battle, their war drums continuing to pound even at the police station. The cacophony of their arguments and protests was punctuated by repeated interjections of "Get down!" and "Rein yourselves in!" from the officers, always in the same tone—a damning indictment of the police force members' vocabulary. Extra hands from other stations stood in a row to one side, confused and unsure as to what they were meant to be doing.

When Luo Wenzhou walked in, he slammed the door hard behind him. His sheer dominating aggression cowed both of the armies facing off before him. Everyone spun to look at him, startled by the bang. Luo Wenzhou leaned back against the doorframe. "Which of you guys assaulted an officer?"

Nobody spoke.

"You think that, if you don't own up to it, the law won't punish you as a group?" Luo Wenzhou's face was stony. "Fine. Lock them all up. Remember to tell their families to post bail. If they don't have families, tell their bosses. And I heard something about illegal occupation of public roads and an unlicensed business? Perfect timing. Let's be *rigorous* about this; punish the wrongdoers properly. After that, I'll ask my colleagues from the local station to pay special attention to everyone here going forward, now that these guys will all have a record."

He'd barely finished speaking when a man who seemed to be in his fifties yelled, "What do you mean, 'a record'? How can you just accuse us of assaulting an officer? Have you got evidence? Are you keeping us here without cause? I'm warning you, I have a heart condition!"

Far from batting an eye, Luo Wenzhou barely raised his voice. "Ever heard of police body cameras, dumbass?" Right on cue, Lang Qiao walked over and handed Luo Wenzhou a printout. Luo Wenzhou took it and glanced over it, then swept a lingering look over the head troublemaker. "What a coincidence." He took his phone out and made a call. "Hello? Principal Han, this is Wenzhou… No, I'm not up to much here at all. Hey—you've got a security guard named Yu Lei at your school, right?"

The man froze, then turned as white as a sheet, as if he really *was* about to have a heart attack.

Phone to his ear, Luo Wenzhou smiled at him. "Could you check? The character for 'Yu' is two dashes and one ticked line, and 'Lei' is written with three 'shi's, as in 'stone.'[7] Male, fifty-three… No, nothing major. He's a fit old man—got into a brawl, and my colleagues at this station have him in custody. But now he says he has a heart condition. If it acts up while he's with us, and news gets out, that'll be a whole new problem on our hands, you know? It'd be more than we could take responsibility for. I'm begging you, Auntie Han, send someone over quick to bail this liability out of here."

Before Luo Wenzhou could hang up, Yu Lei seemed to panic. "I…I-I-I was just keeping the neighborhood safe! It was self-defense!"

Luo Wenzhou snorted. "Do you even know what self-defense is?"

"It was self-defense!" Yu Lei pointed at some young men who'd clearly set themselves apart from the larger group. "Last night's killer was

one of them! I heard it!”

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NOBODY COULD’VE ANTICIPATED that the spectacle at the police station would transition into a series of individual questionings. Every officer who was out investigating had to rush back to the station to take statements from the witnesses.

“That old bastard Yu Lei claims that, after he turned off the lights and went to bed last night, he overheard an argument while he was half asleep. It was between two men, both with strong accents. Their dialect was too heavy, so he didn’t understand what they were fighting about, but he could tell from their tones that they knew each other.” Lang Qiao brushed her long hair back over her shoulders. “We verified that Yu Lei’s house is very close to where the deceased was discovered—less than sixty yards away. He lives in a single-story house, so if his back window was open, he probably *could* have heard them.”

“What time?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“We’re not sure. Yu Lei said that he goes to bed around nine and usually has no problem getting to sleep. If he was half asleep, it wouldn’t have been later than nine thirty, which fits our estimated time of death. His neighbors say they heard the arguing too, vaguely. Since there are lots of drunken fights around the area, they didn’t think anything of it. None went out to check.”

“Lao-Luo.” Tao Ran stuck his head in. There was a bandage on his chin. “We have someone here who you should come see.”

A small, thin youth had been seated in another room for questioning. He was being interviewed by Xiao Haiyang, who sat across from him, his glasses now held together by clear tape.

“The kid’s name is Ma Xiaowei,” said Tao Ran. “He says he’s eighteen, but he looks underage to me. The brawl this afternoon started when he stole five yuan. He was He Zhongyi’s roommate. It’s very likely he was the last person to see the deceased alive.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. He pushed the door open and went in. Ma Xiaowei swiftly glanced up at him. A hint of panic crossed his young face, perhaps because of Sergeant Luo’s overpowering aura.

“It’s fine,” Xiao Haiyang told the kid. “Keep going.”

Ma Xiaowei clasped his hands together. His voice sounded like the buzz of a mosquito. “He…He Zhongyi was from H— Province, same as one of our other roommates. But apparently H— is big, and they were from different towns. Zhongyi-ge’s hometown was a bit farther out. He only got here last year. Nice guy, extrovert. Pretty diligent when we were living together too, always cleaning up… He n-never fought with anyone.”

Xiao Haiyang continued to question him. “Do you know whether he had any friends or relatives around here?”

Ma Xiaowei’s chin dipped for an instant, as if he’d suddenly thought of something. Then he quickly shook his head. “D-don’t know. I never met any.”

Liar. With his eyes fixed on the kid, Luo Wenzhou broke in. “Where were you from eight to ten last night?”

Ma Xiaowei gulped. He still didn’t dare to look at Luo Wenzhou. “At h-home…” he mumbled hesitantly.

“What were you doing at home?”

“N-nothing, just…watching TV.”

“Alone?”

Ma Xiaowei seemed to realize what Luo Wenzhou was implying. His expression abruptly changed.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart.” Luo Wenzhou pulled out the chair and sat in front of Ma Xiaowei, smiling pleasantly. “We’re from the serious-crimes division. We only take care of major criminal cases. You won’t get sentenced for trying to steal five yuan, so relax.”

That seemed to agitate Ma Xiaowei even worse. He could barely sit still.

“Come to think of it, though, if there were *multiple* thefts and no sign of the thief going straight, they could get charged even if the amount wasn’t bigger than that. This was your first theft, though, right?”

Ma Xiaowei looked so scared that he seemed to forget how to breathe.

Luo Wenzhou rapped the table lightly. “So you were watching TV alone? What about your housemates?”

“Zh…Zhongyi-ge changed and left as soon as he got back from work yesterday, and Liu-ge—that’s the guy from Zhongyi’s home province—he went back home a few days ago for a funeral. And the other workers I live

with, uh, went out to play mahjong or poker or something. So I was a-alone, b-but it wasn't me—"

"I didn't say it was," Luo Wenzhou said, cutting off Ma Xiaowei's stammering. "Neighbors said that they heard an argument near the crime scene. Based on its proximity to your place, you should've been able to make it out too. Did you hear anything?"

Ma Xiaowei bit his lip hard.

"If you did, say yes; if you didn't, say no. Do you really need to think this long about it?"

"M-maybe I heard something, but the TV was a little too—"

"Around what time?"

"Nine fifteen," Ma Xiaowei blurted.

The instant he said these words, everyone—from Xiao Haiyang, who was taking notes with his head down, to Tao Ran, who stood listening by the door—turned to stare at him.

Luo Wenzhou squinted. Then his gaze, sharp as an awl, fell on Ma Xiaowei. After a moment, he barked a short laugh. "Didn't you just say you 'maybe' heard it? How'd you remember the exact time, then?"

Ma Xiaowei had no answer.

"Xiao-Ma, you need to be honest," Tao Ran said softly. "How did you know that it was nine fifteen? Did you just hear the argument, or were you near the scene itself?"

"You know," Luo Wenzhou added, not giving Ma Xiaowei time to respond, "if you don't clear this up today, you'll be suspected of a serious crime!"

“I believe it wasn’t you,” added Tao Ran, playing along obligingly with Luo Wenzhou’s good-cop-bad-cop routine. “And if you didn’t do it, you have no reason to be scared. Just tell us what you know. This is a major case—a man is dead. You know how serious this is, right?”

Ma Xiaowei instinctively turned his pleading eyes toward Tao Ran. Luo Wenzhou slammed the table. “Who are you looking at? We’re asking you to ’fess up!”

“It wasn’t me… I h-heard it,” Ma Xiaowei insisted, on the verge of tears. “At nine fifteen, I heard people arguing downstairs. Their voices sounded familiar, so I thought I’d go down and look…”

“What’d you see?”

“Nothing.” Ma Xiaowei’s eyes widened. “I didn’t see anyone, not even a hint of someone’s shadow. It was like everything I’d heard was a hallucination. The streetlight was broken, and I… I…”

Luo Wenzhou snorted. “You telling us a ghost story, kid?”

When Ma Xiaowei turned to him in fear, his eyes were reddened and so visibly bloodshot that they appeared covered in a scarlet net.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran interrogated him like that, back and forth, question after question, until it was time to clock out for the evening. The questioning almost broke Ma Xiaowei down, yet the teen didn’t leak anything else of use, just kept repeating his shoddy late-night ghost story over and over.

“I don’t think it was that kid,” Lang Qiao said as they left the district bureau. “He doesn’t have the mental fortitude. Scare him a little, and he spits everything out. I don’t think he’d have lasted that long under our

questioning if anything really happened involving him… That ghost story's pretty weird, though."

Luo Wenzhou grunted.

"What?" asked Tao Ran.

"He's not necessarily cleared," said Luo Wenzhou. "Maybe he only told us part of the truth. He's probably hiding something else. But let's talk about it tomorrow. How are you two going back? Are you heading to the city bureau first, or—"

A whistle cut him off. The three supervising officers raised their heads as one and saw a six-foot-tall SUV parked by the road, a man leaning against it. "You've worked hard today, Officer Tao. Can I offer you a ride home?"

The man was tall, lean, and dressed in a black button-down shirt and a neat pair of slacks. He crossed his legs casually, his hands in his pockets. The ends of his long hair grazed his shoulders. At the first hint of eye contact, his eyes glowed with a smile offered generously to all like a free buffet.

In all her life, Lang Qiao had never seen a man come to a police station just to stand at the entrance flirtatiously. Stunned, she couldn't help asking, "Deputy Tao, is this your friend?"

Tao Ran now appeared to be experiencing a toothache.

Lang Qiao's keen senses instantly alerted her that something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked, confused.

Tao Ran was just about to go over and talk to the guy by the SUV when Luo Wenzhou reached out to grab Tao Ran's elbow, then raised his

chin at the man across from them and broke his silence: “What’re you doing here, Fei Du?”

Fei Du uncrossed his legs, tucking them back under him, and glanced up at Luo Wenzhou. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t realize this place had the name ‘Luo’ written on it.”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes, but otherwise, his poker face remained. Fei Du, who was still looking at him, gave him a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. Lang Qiao, still completely lost, sensed an inexplicable, lethal crackle of hostility in the air.

After a moment, Fei Du gave Luo Wenzhou an extremely punchable sneer and turned to Tao Ran instead. “Get in, Tao Ran. If we don’t hurry, Sergeant Luo will give me a ticket.”

“Did I say we were done with work?” Luo Wenzhou asked coldly before Tao Ran could reply. “You two, come back to the bureau with me. We need to give Director Gen Zhang a report on our progress. We also need to meet about the case.”

Lang Qiao was thunderstruck. Hadn’t he just said they’d talk about it tomorrow?!

Fei Du sighed lazily. “It’s such a tragedy to have a menopausal boss. Here’s an idea: I’ll drive Tao-ge and this lovely police-force beauty back to the bureau. They’ve been busy all day; they should sit in a more spacious car and stretch their legs.”

“The police car isn’t spacious enough? You really must avoid being taken into custody in one of our cars, Fei-zong, or you won’t even have elbow room,” Luo Wenzhou told him.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Fei Du replied, adopting a phony smile. “Tao-ge, I booked a table at the Western restaurant near your workplace. Even if you work late, you’ll have dinner, won’t you?”

“We’re servants of the people,” Luo Wenzhou put in. “We don’t eat. How could we stuff our faces when we haven’t caught the murderer yet?”

Lang Qiao couldn’t imagine what higher power she’d offended to deserve this. Having struggled all this time to get a word in edgewise, Tao Ran finally erupted. “Enough! Will you two quit it?!”

Luo Wenzhou sneered and turned, beginning to leave. “Come on, hurry up. And what are you staring at, Goggle-Eyes Lang? If you like checking out pretty boys, you can do that at home. Don’t waste work hours on it!”

Fei Du scoffed. “Would this lovely young lady consider changing jobs and joining *my* company?” He cocked his head at Lang Qiao like a stereotypical TV-drama CEO. “Police work is such a waste of your heavenly gifts. Come to work for me, and I’ll quintuple your salary and demand no work from you at all.”

Tao Ran turned to glare at him. “You too—enough!”

Fei Du met his gaze and nodded meekly but continued to fan the flames. “Okay. For *your* sake.”

“Tao Ran, what’s taking so long?!” Luo Wenzhou exclaimed.

Not wanting to upset either of these divas, Officer Tao simply rolled his eyes at the innocent night sky and then jogged after Luo Wenzhou. After a few steps, though, he turned back instinctively. Sure enough, Fei Du was still standing there motionlessly, watching him leave. He smiled at the sight

of Tao Ran turning, as if he'd expected it. He raised two fingers to his lips, then flicked them gently toward Tao Ran.

Tao Ran didn't know what to say. If the international community had awards for playboys, Lord Fei could've won a Nobel.

Luo Wenzhou drove the police car back to the bureau as fast as if it were the *Chang'e 3* spacecraft. Despite its cumbersome size, Fei Du's SUV tailed them closely. Lang Qiao's control over her curiosity finally snapped. "Who's that pretty boy? He's good-looking *and* a good driver."

Tao Ran gave her a warning look, trying to shut her up before she stepped on any toes, but it was too late. In the rearview mirror, Luo Wenzhou saw Fei Du pull over by the bureau's front gate. He immediately called the sergeant of the traffic police next door. "There's a car parked illegally outside our gate. Hurry up and ticket the owner. The steeper the fine the better, since the brat has money."

After a while, a young traffic officer called Luo Wenzhou back and stammered, "Sergeant Luo, I gave him a ticket and told him, 'The fine for illegal parking is two hundred yuan.'"

"And?"

"Um, he gave me a thousand and said he'll stay parked there for another eight hundred yuan's worth of time."

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. Lang Qiao gave him a cautious look. "Are we still having that meeting, boss?"

"Obviously!" Luo Wenzhou snapped.

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LUO WENZHOU COULDN'T POSSIBLY keep Tao Ran at the bureau forever. The outcome of their day's work had already shown clearly that there really wasn't much overtime for them to do. Waiting by the gate, Fei Du folded his ticket into a little boat. With the AC on, he leaned back comfortably in his seat and played a single English song on repeat, enjoying the pleasant fragrance of his car. The song was playing for the eighth time when Tao Ran finally came out.

Tao Ran wasn't the particular type. He had slung his old briefcase over one shoulder, his hair in disarray, his shoes now unpolished for several days, and the bandage on his chin accentuating the harried fatigue on his face. He walked up to the SUV and knocked on Fei Du's window. "You still haven't moved, Your Majesty?"

Fei Du rolled the window down. The looped melody of "You Raise Me Up" eagerly unfurled and escaped from the opening, fluttering out into the night and dissipating. When Tao Ran heard that, his expression changed. Before he could say anything, though, Fei Du indifferently shut the music off.

"Someone posted a video of you guys stopping a fight. I saw it and got worried about you, so I came." Fei Du pointed at the bandage on Tao Ran's chin. "Are you okay?"

Tao Ran chuckled bitterly. Handling ten brawls would be less stressful than getting caught between Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du.

It took only a single glance for Fei Du to discern what Tao Ran wanted to say. "Fine, fine. I'll avoid your menopausal colleague next time,

okay?" He reached out and took Tao Ran's bag. "Do you want to drive or ride shotgun?"

"Excuse you. My 'menopausal colleague' was in the same year as me at school. You'll be old one day too, you know." Tao Ran opened the door, let Fei Du out, and then slipped into the driver's seat. "Why'd you change cars again? Couldn't wait to squander more of your fortune?"

"You complained that my other cars were too flashy, didn't you?" Fei Du walked over to the passenger's side, unconcerned. "So I bought another. This one's cheap and steady. If you like it, you can have it."

Tao Ran fastened his seatbelt, not bothering to answer. He assumed this was just bullshit.

"Let me buy you dinner, Tao Ran," Fei Du said, all smiles.

"I'm full from the sight of you." Tao Ran pressed a hand to Fei Du's head. "And who are you calling *Tao Ran*? Don't think you can forget your manners with me."

"I—" Fei Du was about to reply when his tone shifted wildly. "What the hell is *this*?!"

Officer Tao Ran happened to have plain tastes, and his satchel might well have been produced during the Qing dynasty; it was ancient and poorly maintained. The moody zipper might choose to open by itself at any time. Fei Du hadn't noticed that when he took the old bag, nor had he checked its orientation, and he accidentally held it with the opening underneath. A folder had slipped out, spilling several crime-scene photos into his lap. The face of the deceased looked particularly pale and ghoulish in the dull light.

Fei Du gasped. If he hadn't been wearing a seatbelt, he might've shot right out of his seat. "Is this a photo of a dead guy? Why does he look so awful?"

"That's an important file. Don't touch those—put them back. It's all the fault of you two idiots. Your fighting gave me such a headache that I forgot that was in the bag. Bringing it out of the bureau is against the rules."

Neck stiff, Fei Du staunchly refused to look down at the dead man on his lap. "I c-can't put them back. I'm hematophobic."

"There's no blood." Tao Ran sighed, sounding tired. "You're not even afraid of our resident bogeyman Luo Wenzhou, who scares *ghosts*, but you're afraid of a dead man?"

One hand covering his own eyes, Fei Du blindly shoved the photos and documents back into their folder. He peeked hesitantly: There was indeed no blood. Finally letting out a slight sigh of relief, he hurriedly reorganized the disheveled materials. The Herculean task quieted him for five minutes.

Suddenly, he asked, "Was it a homicide?"

Tao Ran hummed noncommittally, not wanting to go into details. "Maybe. We're still investigating."

Quick on the uptake, Fei Du stopped asking. He clipped the tidied documents back together in the folder, then adjusted the broken zipper in the faint light and said absently, "Poor thing."

"Hm?"

Fei Du didn't even look up. "Nervous and excited to meet someone, only for that person to think he's better dead."

Tao Ran was nonplussed. “Why do you say that?”

“You guys took a photo of the victim’s jacket, didn’t you? There was a tag on it that he hadn’t cut off yet.”

“Of course we checked his clothes. That jacket was from some small shop nearby. We verified with the shop owner and from security-camera footage that the deceased bought it himself.”

“I’m not saying the killer put it on him. Why would you put a jacket on someone after you killed them?” Fei Du laughed. “But if he wore that new jacket out without removing the tag, maybe it seemed a bit pricey, cost more than he was used to spending. But he needed it for something important, so he figured he’d wear it once and then return it. Underprivileged students sometimes do that when they go for their first job interviews. Was the deceased left-handed?”

Tao Ran paused. He’d visited He Zhongyi’s rental; he thought back on where everything was placed. “No.”

“The shoes are from a mid-range brand,” Fei Du continued airily. “They’re well maintained, but the wear on the left one is obvious. He probably borrowed them.”

According to the school security guard’s statement, if He Zhongyi had argued with the person he met before he died, then that person was a man he knew. It was probably someone from his home province, possibly even a relative—otherwise, they wouldn’t have used the province’s dialect. Would he have needed to dress up to meet someone like that?

Tao Ran lived close to work, so they arrived before he puzzled out those details. Collecting himself, he stopped the car by the front gate of his

apartment complex. “What you’re saying is that since he got dressed up before he died, it’s likely he was meeting a woman?”

“Not necessarily. He may have taken the trouble to borrow clothes and shoes, but the outfit’s pretty formal. I think it was more for a job interview, or maybe he was meeting someone he really respected. If he *was* meeting a woman, they were probably set up by a mutual acquaintance, and it was probably their first time meeting.” Fei Du opened the zipper on Tao Ran’s old satchel, then rezipped it shut and tugged lightly. It didn’t come undone again. He handed the bag to Tao Ran. “Your zipper head was loose—I tightened it. Anyway, it’s like… If I went out to meet you, I definitely wouldn’t put on a three-piece suit—although I might spray on a bit of cologne.”

Fei Du’s eyes were a shade lighter than pure black. In the dark, they seemed especially bright, and when he fixed them on a person, they seemed to speak—enticing the listener to forget themselves and drown in them. It was a shame that Deputy Sergeant Tao was effectively blind to that.

“Buzz off. If you want to practice flirting with your girls, don’t use me.” Tao Ran gave Fei Du’s conjectures a moment of serious consideration, then asked thoughtfully, “What do you think it means to stick a piece of paper on someone’s forehead after killing them, then?”

“Oh,” said Fei Du. “Maybe they wanted to keep the corpse from reanimating.” Tao Ran almost rolled his eyes. Then, however, Fei Du assumed a different tone. “Or maybe they regretted killing him and subconsciously expressed their grief and respect for the deceased by imitating an existing practice.”

Tao Ran thought that over. “What if it didn’t cover his whole face, though?” he probed. “What if it was just a small strip of paper taped to the victim’s hair, only covering a narrow area from his forehead to the space between his eyes?”

“The forehead’s a very symbolic facial feature. When elders reprimand children, when stronger people bully weaker ones, and when owners punish pets, they always strike the forehead. Then again, maybe the paper on his forehead represents a tag. You’d only tag something you were selling at a shopping complex, so maybe it’s a form of objectification. What was written on the paper?”

“‘Money,’” said Tao Ran. Fei Du raised an eyebrow. His brows were well shaped, long and clearly defined as they curved into his temples; they gave him a cold beauty. “What are you thinking?” asked Tao Ran.

“Many things. Still, a single word could mean anything, so reading too much into it could be misleading.” Fei Du laughed. “Tao Ran, we’re at your place.”

Tao Ran started, only then realizing that he’d discussed far too much with Fei Du. He pushed the door open to leave, but then thought of something and paused. Still holding the door, he bent down slightly. “Open your hand.”

Confused, Fei Du did as he was told. Tao Ran dug something from his pocket and put it in his palm.

“Fei Du, if you want to jump into the sea, your best bet is to get changed and go swim around on your own for a bit—not cling to a lifesaver while you stand in one corner, soaking your feet. You’re grown now. You can’t rely too much on one person. I’m going home now—drive safe.”

Holding the handful of milk candies Tao Ran had given him, Fei Du watched him walk into his aging apartment building. The candies were from a very old brand that Fei Du hadn't seen on the market in years. He'd assumed that the factory closed down. He didn't know where Tao Ran had gotten them. Maybe they were leftover, expired candies. After all, since they were out of their main packaging, there was no way to see their production date.

Fei Du unwrapped a candy and ate it. It was cheap and old; the texture was gritty, and the substance stuck to the teeth, but it was at least sweet enough.

He put the song Tao Ran had frowned at back on an infinite loop and sat silently for a moment. Only when he'd finished the entire handful of candies did he get back into the driver's seat. Just as he was about to drive off, he suddenly noticed a photo Tao Ran had left behind in the car. The tiny passport-style shot had slipped into a crack in the seat, escaping his notice earlier.

Fei Du turned on the light inside the car and picked up the deceased's passport photo. Unlike the earlier photo showing the corpse's sallow, scary face, this one let Fei Du make out the young man's actual appearance. His brow slowly creasing, Fei Du stared at the crescent-shaped scar on the young man's temple.

Chapter 5

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Luo Wenzhou returned to the city bureau and spoke with Director Gen Zhang for a while, then rushed to the Huashi District Bureau with Tao Ran. Lang Qiao beat them there, and just after they parked, she came up to meet them. She handed them each a cup of coffee.

"What took you so long?" she asked them in a small voice. "The district bureau has Ma Xiaowei in custody—they're convinced that he's a primary suspect. They stuffed him in a police car and brought him in this morning. Reporters for online media chased them the whole way—we only just got rid of them."

"What?" Tao Ran asked, immediately alarmed.

Luo Wenzhou put a hand on his shoulder. "Did they go through the right process?"

Lang Qiao sighed. "That old Wang Hongliang's a sly one, Boss. He'd never make any obvious slipups in front of you."

"Well, what's the evidence?" Luo Wenzhou asked, his voice deepening.

"He Zhongyi's cell phone." Lang Qiao spoke quickly. "It's rather strange. His phone was found in Ma Xiaowei's possession. The official story is that, last night, one of the district bureau officers on the case received a report that Ma Xiaowei had been seen holding a new phone that looked like the one He Zhongyi lost. The district bureau immediately set out to bring Ma Xiaowei in for questioning, and they did find the phone in

his room. There were fingerprints on it belonging to both Ma Xiaowei and the deceased."

Luo Wenzhou frowned. Tao Ran asked further questions. "Who reported the phone? How did they know it was He Zhongyi's?"

"Apparently, it's a new model. It isn't cheap, so very few people around here have one. He Zhongyi got it as a gift from a relative, it seems. When he first received it, everyone saw it, so they all remembered it."

"It doesn't matter who reported it or why. Even if Wang Hongliang's team found it by breaking in, they could always just invent an informant after the fact." Luo Wenzhou waved a hand. "What matters is the phone. Just *having* the phone doesn't make Ma Xiaowei the killer. There isn't enough evidence to arrest him for that. Did he say something he shouldn't have? Did someone force something out of him?"

"Bullseye." Lang Qiao looked around cautiously to make sure nobody else was there, then continued, "They probably didn't even have to force a confession. Ma Xiaowei lied about his age so he could start working younger. I got someone to check last night, and his ID is fake. He's not even sixteen. I'm betting they scared him enough that he spilled everything. When they asked how he got the phone, he dithered for a while, then said he picked it up."

"At the crime scene?" Lang Qiao nodded helplessly, and Luo Wenzhou sighed. "And then they asked him what time? Did he say around nine fifteen, when he went down to check on the argument he heard?"

Lang Qiao spread her hands. With other witnesses having already attested to the time and place of the incident, Ma Xiaowei said that he'd

been there and “picked up” a phone. As for the murderer? Nope, the kid hadn’t seen him.

Saying that had been as good as a confession.

Luo Wenzhou was speechless for a while. Eventually, he rubbed his chin. “Well, I haven’t come across such an honest ‘killer’ in years.”

Wang Hongliang chose that moment to walk over to them, evidently in high spirits. “I was gone just a short while yesterday for that jurisdictional security meeting, and as soon as I come back, I hear that we’ve caught the suspect already. Wow—the city bureau’s young supervisors are real professionals. Talk about efficiency!”

Luo Wenzhou was forced to thaw out his dark, icy expression to give Wang Hongliang a flawless smile. “Wang-dage, you can drop the false modesty. I bet you’re annoyed that we’ve come to take credit for your work.”

Wang Hongliang smiled, so wide and toothily that his eyes disappeared and his two front teeth seemed to protrude from his lips. “What’s all this about credit?” he asked, his voice oily. “We’re all just serving the people!”

He’d barely finished speaking before Lang Qiao butted in to ruin the mood. “But, Director Wang, the chain of evidence isn’t complete yet, is it? We haven’t found the murder weapon, and Ma Xiaowei hasn’t confessed. There are so many points of suspicion left. Could you let us know what you’ll need our help with after this?”

Lang Qiao’s gaze was a true lighthouse beacon. The city bureau’s forensic specialist Zeng Guangling had personally verified that her eyes took up more real estate on her face than on 99 percent of comparable East

Asian faces. Since people with bigger eyes tended to get crow's feet, Lang Qiao rarely smiled. Under special circumstances that forced her to do so, she usually just lifted the corners of her lips, keeping her eye muscles stiff. Over time, she became adept at smiles that didn't reach her eyes, and though she was actually an idiot, this habit gave her the air of a cool, aloof beauty. She could easily carry off interrogations or play bad cop—do anything that required significant intimidation, really.

She'd seemingly offered "help," but her tone seemed to spew venom at her audience, and the icy glare of her terrifyingly enormous eyes seemed to quickly scare Wang Hongliang's front teeth away from "serving the people" and back into the safety of his mouth. Wang Hongliang's expression changed. "What are you trying to say, Xiao-Lang?"

"Hey, Xiao-Qiao-er, watch your tone," Luo Wenzhou loudly admonished, reaching out and tugging Lang Qiao back behind him. He looked down at Wang Hongliang from his towering height and gave him a fake little smile. "Don't mind her. When young people first start work, they don't know how to speak. Xiao-Qiao-er means that we haven't managed to help much before now, so if you need us for anything else at this point, just say the word."

Wang Hongliang was too wary of Luo Wenzhou to open hostilities, so he simply pretended not to know the difference between friendly and unfriendly words, forcing a smile and turning away.

Lang Qiao scowled at his retreating back, her hands planted on her hips. "I heard there have been enough official complaints about that old geezer to fill a shoebox. How's he still that cocky?"

Luo Wenzhou glanced sideways at her, putting a cigarette in his mouth. “Aren’t you scared that he’ll make life hard for you if we don’t manage to take him down now?”

“Ha!” Lang Qiao rolled her eyes. “He can try. If worse comes to worst, I’ll just quit and make a living off my good looks.”

“How can a lady be so shameless?” A smile flickered across Luo Wenzhou’s lips, but quickly faded. “That Ma Xiaowei is either the perpetrator or witless, but I’m leaning toward the latter. If I killed someone, I’d find some reasonable excuse to give afterward. Even ‘I didn’t hear anything; I was watching TV at home’ would be better than that ghost story he told the police. Also, considering that we haven’t found any trace of the perpetrator at the crime scene, our suspect is probably cold-blooded and careful, with a clear understanding of how police investigations work. I doubt it’s this silly kid.”

“I don’t think it’s him either.” Tao Ran hesitated, then quickly summarized what Fei Du had said to him the previous evening. “Going on that, we should start by looking into He Zhongyi’s personal connections. For instance, who gave him that phone? And maybe we can talk to the person who lent him the shoes.”

Luo Wenzhou hesitated. “Hmm. You’re saying his shoes were borrowed? That idea’s pretty—”

“It’s not *my* idea,” said Tao Ran.

Luo Wenzhou was taken aback for a moment. Then, swiftly enough that he seemed almost to read Tao Ran’s mind, he processed the other man’s implication and furrowed his brow. “Fei Du? I told you, it’s best to keep him separate from these things.”

“I know. Last night was an accident,” Tao Ran said, nipping that line of conversation in the bud. “But what do you think of that reasoning?”

“It checks out. Let’s look into those shoes.” Luo Wenzhou nodded. “Tao Ran, keep pursuing the case. Lang Qiao, watch over the special investigation team working on Ma Xiaowei. He’s beyond fishy. See what else he knows. And be on your guard against Wang Hongliang’s subordinates, in case they try to pull something. I’ll take care of Fatty Wang in the meantime. Call if you need me, though. All right, let’s go, hotties—we’re doing unpaid overtime today.”

The conversation had left Lang Qiao brimming with curiosity, so the moment Luo Wenzhou left, she hurried after Tao Ran. “Deputy Tao, were you talking about that cute guy from yesterday? Who was he? How come the boss said not to let him touch the case?”

“Of course it wouldn’t be right to involve him in the case,” replied Tao Ran evasively. “He’s not a cop.”

“Then how come the boss nodded as soon as he heard that that idea was his?” Lang Qiao persisted. “Is he like Detective Conan?”

When Tao Ran sighed and turned to look at her, Lang Qiao widened her already extremely evident eyes, batting her eyelashes at him.

“You’ll get wrinkles from blinking like that,” said Tao Ran. Lang Qiao hurriedly placed her fingers on her temples and the corners of her eyes, pressing them flat. Tao Ran thought for a moment, then explained simply, “Wenzhou and I handled a case together seven years ago that Fei Du reported.”

At that point, Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran had just graduated, and both young men had about as much experience as they did hair above their lips

—which was to say, nearly none. Luo Wenzhou, the son of an official, was especially cocky and stubborn, unwilling to bend himself to accommodate anyone else. He saw himself as bursting with talent, the best in the world—that Englishman Sherlock Holmes could eat his heart out. It was as if, rather than going to work every day, Luo Wenzhou were going out to save the galaxy—but his standards far exceeded his abilities, and he was unreliable on the job. During the basic stage of his practical training, he would be sent to settle small community disputes, only to transform them into full-on wars.

One evening, few staff were on hand at their station; the rest had been assigned to a multilateral venture to catch a group of robbers with widespread operations. Officers from the city bureau, several district bureaus, and even a few smaller stations had been moved onto that initiative. Only Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran, two kids their superiors deemed more trouble than they were worth, had been left on duty at the station.

"We got a call from the one-ten emergency line[8] saying that a kid in our area wanted to make a report," Tao Ran went on. "He'd gotten back from school for the weekend and found his mother's dead body at home. That kid was Fei Du. He was still in high school back then."

Lang Qiao was shocked.

"Later on, our investigation determined that his mother had killed herself. Wenzhou went to tell him in person, but Fei Du didn't believe him. I think they even argued about it… Anyway, since then, they haven't really seen eye to eye." As he spoke, they reached the entrance of the district bureau. "You can probably tell that Fei Du's from a well-off family. His father was a businessman, and he spent a lot of time away on work trips. He

didn't return until days after the incident. As a kid, Fei Du was a bit of a loner; none of the nannies his father hired for him ever lasted. Most of the time, he was alone in that big house where his mother died.

"This was the first proper case Wenzhou and I had ever handled, so it meant something special to us. We never forgot it. And it was so sad to see that kid without anyone to watch over him that sometimes I'd pick him up and look after him for a few days. He spent more time with us back then, and we gradually realized that the kid had a special talent."

"For what?"

Tao Ran paused, then said softly, "Crime."

Not "deduction," Lang Qiao immediately noticed. Not "investigation." *Crime*, specifically. But before she could press any further, Tao Ran fell silent, waved her off, and strode swiftly away.

Chapter 6

"D…DEPUTY SERGEANT T-TAO!"

Tao Ran turned around to see someone sprinting wildly toward him. It was the district bureau's Little Four-Eyes—Xiao Haiyang, the one with the rapid-fire mouth.

It seemed Xiao Haiyang hadn't had time yet to replace his broken glasses; they sat lopsided on his face, falling below his cheekbone as he skidded to a stop in front of Tao Ran. Xiao Haiyang's features had a stiffness reminiscent of a facelift, and his expression was strangely severe, yet he was gasping for breath, panting so violently that Tao Ran felt a sympathetic choking sensation in his own chest. He wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers, then adjusted his glasses, which clung for dear life to the end of his nose. Finally, taking his phone out of his pocket so that he could read his notes, he began, "Deputy Sergeant Tao, I have a report for you."

Tao Ran waited patiently for Xiao Haiyang's breathing to steady. "Don't panic. Take your time."

"You see, during yesterday's door-to-door inquiries on the West Side, I noticed that the living situation in that building is pretty chaotic. The turnover rate for tenants is high in general, and tends to be seasonal. Tenants change jobs and move so frequently that it's less like an apartment complex and more like a fleabag extended-stay motel. The people living there aren't very close to each other, except for those who come from the same area and watch each other's backs. For all our efforts yesterday, we didn't gather much useful information."

“Mm.” Tao Ran nodded, encouraging him subtly.

“But one of He Zhongyi’s housemates did come from the same province as him. His name is…” Xiao Haiyang checked his notes. “Zhao Yulong. He and the deceased were very close, and we were told that he helped He Zhongyi get his delivery job. But Ma Xiaowei said Zhao Yulong had gone home for the past few days.”

Tao Ran raised his eyebrows in surprise. This Zhao Yulong was precisely the person he was looking for.

“Last night, I found the person in charge of stock delivery for that café chain and got Zhao Yulong’s contact details,” Xiao Haiyang continued. “After I called Zhao Yulong and told him what happened, he promised to take the last long-distance bus back to Yancheng that same night. I’m meant to meet him today.”

Tao Ran looked at Xiao Haiyang contemplatively. “I thought the district bureau was focusing its investigation on Ma Xiaowei.”

Xiao Haiyang’s face tightened even further. He fiddled with the hem of his button-down, perhaps unconsciously. “Well, something feels off about that mysterious person who gave He Zhongyi the phone. There are still too many unanswered questions for us to be certain that Ma Xiaowei was the perpetrator. I said that to our sergeant as well…but he told me to stop digging for no reason, and not to think I’m always right.”

At that, Tao Ran’s face darkened, his kindly smile disappearing. “What time are you meeting Zhao Yulong?”

“Oh.” Xiao Haiyang checked his watch. “In an hour, if his bus is on time.”

“I’ll go with you,” Tao Ran said decisively. “Come on!”

***

WHILE JUNIOR OFFICERS pounded the streets underthe hot sun, Lord Fei reclined against the soft leatherof his revolving office chair, his temple propped against his fingers. The laptop on his desk displayed a full encapsulation of He Zhongyi’s brief, unremarkable life. After a pause, Fei Du found a number in his contact list and dialed it.

“Hey, Chang-xiong? It’s me.” Fei Du listened to the reply over the phone, then bowed his head with a laugh. “Yeah. I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it, but there’s something I really need your help with.”

Less than half an hour later, Fei Du had successfully acquired what he’d sought: footage from the security cameras near Chengguang Mansion from the night the mansion opened.

It was lunch hour. Fei Du heated a bottle of sweetened milk in the kitchen microwave, complimented the secretary’s figure in passing, then locked himself in his office and put on his earphones. Through them, he looped the same song he’d played on repeat in his car. Then he pulled out a sheet of A4 paper. Using an abstract style of drawing that only he understood, he sketched a simple map, then twirled the fountain pen and thought for a moment. He drew a few light circles, then wrote “8:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.” Another pause followed, and then he changed “8:00” to “8:30.”

Fei Du drew a few files from the large collection of security footage and compiled them. Then he chose the sections of the footage timestamped

8:30 to 9:30 and fast-forwarded through them. Scenes from multiple different cameras flickered on-screen. Fei Du leaned back lazily in his chair, every ounce of focus in him seeming to concentrate in his eyes.

***

LUO WENZHOU STROLLED PAST an intersection in Huashi, a briefcase under his arm and his flashy sunglasses set firmly on his face. Now and then, he raised his arm to hail a passing taxi, but none were vacant. Seeing that, the drivers of unlicensed cabs—a local specialty in Huashi—called out to him in unison from their parking spots on the side of the street.

"Hey, man, need a ride?"

"Where're you headed?"

"It's cheap—and faster than a taxi!"

Luo Wenzhou inspected the platoon fastidiously, at last pausing in front of a young man with a flattop. The young man was extremely shrewd. He opened the door for Luo Wenzhou immediately. "Hop in, sir. Where are you headed?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't say a word. He bent down and got in.

The driver switched the AC on and pulled the car out of the line. He was very young, no older than twenty. Compared to his comrades, with their grease-slick style of wooing customers, he seemed inexperienced and

cautious. Glancing at Luo Wenzhou in the rearview mirror, he politely reminded his customer, “You haven’t said where you’d like to go, sir…?”

“Just keep driving.” Luo Wenzhou took his shades off, and his piercing gaze met the driver’s in the mirror. The driver froze, his expression growing nervous. Unhurried, Luo Wenzhou opened the briefcase and pulled out a photocopied document. “I have an anonymous report here.” He flipped casually through it.

The driver’s face immediately fell, and his car nearly grazed the one next to it, which responded with a long, loud honk.

“Don’t worry. I’m not from your district bureau,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Keep driving.”

***

BY THAT POINT, Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang had successfully met up with Zhao Yulong, He Zhongyi’s friend who hailed from the same province. The three entered a small noodle shop together.

Zhao Yulong was well past middle age. Despite his continued difficulties finding a foothold in Yancheng after all his years struggling to do so, he looked far more dignified than the young men who met with closed doors at every turn. The fatigue of his nearly twenty-hour bus journey was plain on Zhao Yulong’s face, and he blinked hard, the wide bags under his eyes drooping. “I really never expected anything to happen to him… May I smoke, officer?”

Nobody was about to stop anyone from smoking in the little noodle shop; it was already chock-full of men puffing out gray clouds. Zhao Yulong took two hard drags and rubbed his face.

"Zhongyi was an honest kid," he said. "Lots of the others go to billiard rooms or those game parlors to bet on chess and cards and mahjong, but he wasn't like that. He never went. He worked hard and made money honestly. Said he wanted to bring it home so his mom could see the doctor. Tell me why a kid who never stole or gambled or caused any trouble was the one to… Ask whatever you like, officers. I'll tell you everything I know."

Tao Ran studied Zhao Yulong. He noticed that, although the man ate with his chopsticks in his right hand, he held his cigarette with the left. The handle of his teacup also pointed left, among other signifiers of left-handedness. This was a common phenomenon. In earlier times, parents had forcibly "corrected" children who ate left-handed, so that their elbows wouldn't battle anyone else's for table space.

Tao Ran took a photo out of his wallet. It showed the shoes on the deceased's feet. "I'd like to ask—did you lend He Zhongyi these shoes?"

Zhao Yulong bent down for a look. His eyes turned a little red, and he nodded, looking dazed. "Those are mine. Was he…was he wearing these shoes when he died?"

"Yes," said Tao Ran. "Do you know why he borrowed them?"

Zhao Yulong seemed bewildered at first. He pondered it carefully, then said in an uncertain tone, "I think…he was going someplace fancy to meet someone. Somewhere called…Something-guang… The Chengguang Building? Manor…?"

Xiao Haiyang sat up abruptly. “Chengguang Mansion!”

“Right, right.” Zhao Yulong nodded repeatedly. “That was the name.”

“Who was he meeting? What for?”

Zhao Yulong shook his head. “I asked, but he wouldn’t say. That kid was tight-lipped, but his intentions were always on the straight and narrow anyway. It didn’t seem right to probe when all he wanted was a pair of shoes.”

“Mr. Zhao,” Xiao Haiyang followed up quickly, “He Zhongyi had a new phone, right?”

“Ah—yes, he did,” Zhao Yulong confirmed. “That white one, you mean? He usually couldn’t even bring himself to use it—he stuck to his old one. He’d just take it out from time to time and look at it. There were layers of screen protectors on it.”

“Do you know who gave him that phone?” Xiao Haiyang inquired.

Zhao Yulong’s brow slowly furrowed.

“What is it?” asked Tao Ran.

“Well, at first he said it came from some other friend from our province. I thought that was strange, since he’d never talked about anyone else he knew around here. He was naive, and I worried that he’d met someone bad. Think about it—buying him something that expensive out of the blue like that? Doesn’t that sound like someone just trying to butter him up for some other reason?” Zhao Yulong tapped the ash from his cigarette. “I wouldn’t stop asking about it, and he finally told me that he’d gotten into a fight with someone while he was making deliveries. They beat him up,

but he never fought back. They must've regretted it or something, because they gave him that phone as an apology."

Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang exchanged a look. Nobody had mentioned this when they were making their rounds, and it was odd. If He Zhongyi had been in a fight and received the phone as an apology, what was there to conceal? If the story was true, then why had He Zhongyi acted so cagey and pretended he'd gotten it from a friend? And He Zhongyi lived with a number of people, but nobody had noticed that he'd been beaten up, so the physical aspect of the fight couldn't have been severe. In light of that, why had this person given him such an expensive apology gift?

They'd thought that investigating the deceased's personal connections would easily reveal the truth, but all at once, everything had grown even more tangled.

Zhao Yulong wasn't certain of the mysterious phone's exact origin, but he was able to provide a rough time frame for the fight He Zhongyi had mentioned. All Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang could do was follow that lead to the delivery company He Zhongyi worked with and search for more clues there.

***

THAT AFTERNOON, the sky—which had been infinitely clear and blue—suddenly changed its mood. Dark clouds came out of nowhere to lay siege to the brilliant rays of sunlight, and a humid wind whistled gloomily. A sudden rainstorm seemed on the cusp of erupting.

The unlicensed taxi driver dropped Luo Wenzhou off near a subway entrance, but Luo Wenzhou didn't leave immediately. He got out, but then pressed a hand to the car door, looking all around. When his gaze flickered across a van by the intersection, it abruptly began to move, driving slowly off as if Luo Wenzhou had caught it red-handed. Luo Wenzhou stooped to the half-open car window and said in the driver's ear, "Someone's watching you. Careful. If anything happens, let me know."

The driver's forehead beaded with sweat despite his vehicle's air conditioning. He quickly nodded. Luo Wenzhou gave him a searching look, then turned and walked to the subway station.

Just as he went through security there, his phone rang.

"Tao Ran? What's up?" he asked, tapping his card on the reader and walking to the platform. Suddenly, he stopped. "What? Repeat that name."

***

THE WIND SLAMMED the loose window in Fei Du's office shut. Papers scattered across the floor. Fei Du's hand, draped across the mouse, finally moved.

Fei Du was focused on one particular frame of the footage. He zoomed in, then rewound the video. The timestamp was approximately 8:50 p.m.

The footage was from a camera situated on the very fringes of the area, almost beyond the outskirts of Chengguang Mansion. It faced a small stone-paved lane. The thoroughfare was close to water, so there were plenty

of bugs around at the beginning of summer, meaning that few people passed this way after dark—and those who did walked quickly. Yet one hesitant figure had been pacing under a streetlight for a long time.

The video revealed only the poor, coarse-looking fit of the man's suit and his short, slight figure. He loitered and smoked several cigarettes, one hand gripping a brown paper bag tightly. Occasionally, he would look in one direction for a few seconds. After a while, he seemed to receive a call; he spoke on his phone for a moment, then walked quickly out of the frame.

Fei Du watched that chunk of footage several times, but he wasn't sure whether the man in the video was the dead man he'd met only once. Picking up his car keys, he closed the laptop, and left. Forty minutes later, Fei Du arrived in Huashi's central business district.

With a glance up at the darkening sky, he retrieved an umbrella from the trunk of his car, then walked toward the green space near Chengguang Mansion. He knew this place well; his path barely wavered, and he soon found the security camera.

The air was so saturated with water vapor that rain seemed on the verge of falling. Fei Du examined the position of the camera, recalling the direction the man had been looking in. Then he turned. At the end of the little lane, he made out Chengguang Mansion. Next, Fei Du's gaze fell upon the nearby trash can. Several butts lay quietly on the pebbled ashtray.

Few people passed this way, so the can was clean; nobody at all seemed to use it. The cleaners only attended to it once every ten days, or maybe even once every two weeks. Pulling a silk handkerchief from his pocket, Fei Du picked the cigarette butts up with great care.

Then his phone rang. He wrapped the butts unhurriedly in the handkerchief before taking out his phone. Seeing the name on the display, he smiled. “Do you miss me that much, Tao Ran-ge? Does every day seem like a lifetime?”

But Tao Ran’s tone was serious. “Were you at Chengguang Mansion two nights ago?”

“Yeah.” Fei Du paused. “Why?”

“With someone named Zhang Donglai?”

Fei Du froze. Before he could respond, a thunderclap shook the ground, and torrential rain whooshed down.

Chapter 7

LANG QIAO MARCHED QUICKLY into the city bureau building with a compact umbrella in her hand, leaving a long trail of wet shoeprints behind her. As she climbed the steps, she slipped and almost face-planted. Scrabbling pathetically for the handrail, she looked up and saw Luo Wenzhou coming down from the director general's floor.

He met her eyes, his face unusually somber. Lang Qiao reached up to push her wet bangs from her forehead. "What's wrong, boss? You look so serious it's freaking me out."

"Tao Ran and Little Four-Eyes from the district bureau followed a clue from He Zhongyi's roommate today and figured out that he might've met up with an unknown person before he died," Luo Wenzhou said in an undertone. Tall and long-legged, he walked rapidly; Lang Qiao had to jog to keep up. "This person reportedly got into a fight with He Zhongyi for one reason or another while He Zhongyi was at work, then gave him that phone as an apology."

When Lang Qiao heard his explanation, she could practically feel her brain steam through her damp hair. "They gave him…a whole phone? Over a *fight*? I fight with people on the subway every day. Why hasn't that ever happened to me?"

Uncharacteristically, Luo Wenzhou didn't banter back. "Tao Ran and Little Four-Eyes followed He Zhongyi's delivery route and asked questions along the way. They found an eyewitness in a chain café. The witness said that, a few days ago, He Zhongyi was leaving after his delivery when he got

into a physical altercation with someone near the café's entrance. The café's security camera caught the license plate of the other party's car."

As he spoke, they arrived at the interrogation room. On the other side of the one-way mirror, Tao Ran sat across from a man in his early twenties. The man's hair was bleached a flaxen blond, and he was outfitted in an array of showy branded clothes. It was clear that he was as short-tempered as he was young, and he seemed to be suppressing his anger with great effort—Lang Qiao wouldn't have been surprised if steam started spewing from his ears.

"Yeah, maybe I did beat that loser up," he was saying, gesturing threateningly as he spoke. "So what? I beat up lots of people. None of this has anything to do with me. Ask Fei Du if you don't believe me—he was with me that day, wasn't he? I'm telling you, Officer Tao, if it weren't for how close you are with Lord Fei… Bringing me in like this, I fucking—I would've—"

Lang Qiao stared at the rowdy young man, bewildered. "Is that our second suspect? How come we brought him back to our bureau?"

"The night he died, the deceased said he was going to Chengguang Mansion. The man in there was at the mansion that evening." Luo Wenzhou sighed. "His name's Zhang Donglai. He's the son of a reputable local businessman."

Lang Qiao blinked. "Oh, a rich guy's son. So?"

"He's also Director Gen Zhang's nephew."

Lang Qiao gaped.

Before she could reboot her stalled brain, an officer ran over with a message for Luo Wenzhou. “Sergeant Luo,” he whispered, “a Mr. Fei has arrived. He wants to see Deputy Sergeant Tao.”

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FEI DU POLITELY THANKED the officer for the drink and took a sip, then put it to one side. The coffee they’d given him was instant and had that weird perfumed-oil smell to it.

He took in the city bureau’s decor, thinking that the person in charge of it had been worryingly tasteless. The work was rough and shoddy, and there were even paint spots on the table edge—probably fresh, since they still gave off a faint smell.

Luo Wenzhou walked in to find Fei Du closely examining the pattern on the table with a frown, his expression unusually dark—Sergeant Luo would’ve thought that he was looking at a hidden corpse, except that the space under the table was empty.

Fei Du looked up. He gave Luo Wenzhou a simple nod, seeming not at all surprised. “Have a seat.”

Does this kid think that this is his house…?!

Fei Du stirred the odorous coffee with a plastic stirrer. “Where’s Tao Ran?”

“Busy.” Luo Wenzhou pulled out a pen and opened his notebook. Not wasting a single word on pleasantries, he demanded, “The night of the

twentieth—that's the day before yesterday—were you with Zhang Donglai? Think before you answer."

Fei Du leaned back in his chair and lifted his head slightly, his ankle carelessly propped on his opposite knee. It wasn't exactly an unmannerly way of sitting, but it did give the impression that the seat couldn't hold him. He looked at Luo Wenzhou with a smile that didn't reach his eyes and asked in response, "Am I a suspect, Sergeant Luo?"

Luo Wenzhou gave him a cold look.

Fei Du spread his hands indifferently. "You'd better be nicer to me, then. I'm not a suspect; there's no weight behind this criminal-investigation summons. If you upset me, I can leave whenever I like."

"Oh." Luo Wenzhou set his pen down. "I need to make you happy before we get into this? Fine. Tell me, what do I do? Sing you a song? Buy you a bag of candy?"

Having just been candy-zoned by Officer Tao the night before, Fei Du choked.

The storm outside lashed at the windows as the two men sat wordlessly across from each other, their mutual distaste heavy between them. After a moment, Luo Wenzhou let out a snort, probably finding his own behavior childish. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, rapped it lightly against the table edge, and prepared to light up.

"I mind," Fei Du responded to the unasked question. "I've had a sore throat lately."

Luo Wenzhou bared his teeth in a smile. "If you were mute, we'd be so close to world peace." Despite his rude words, he put the lighter down,

then spun the unlit cigarette between his fingers. “Zhang Donglai said he met you at the entrance of Chengguang Mansion around eight o’clock in the evening two days ago. He said you could be his alibi because you didn’t leave until midnight.”

“I did arrive before eight and leave at ten past twelve,” Fei Du replied evenly. “And I did speak with him at both those times. The host provided pretty…abundant entertainment, though, so I wouldn’t say that Zhang Donglai was within my sight for all four hours—and you wouldn’t believe me even if I did.”

Luo Wenzhou tore unthinkingly at the cigarette’s casing. “Why? Weren’t you two goofing off together the whole time?”

Fei Du leaned forward slightly, propping his elbows on the table. The mild, damp scent of his cologne, diluted by the rain, greeted Luo Wenzhou. “No, because he was ‘busy,’ and I don’t like sharing partners with other men. If you keep asking such dull questions and pretending that you don’t know what goes on at these parties, Sergeant Luo, I’ll be forced to take my leave.”

“I didn’t realize you were so particular,” Luo Wenzhou said in the same professional tone, not so much as raising his eyebrows as he delivered the insult. “So you’re saying that you can’t prove that Zhang Donglai didn’t kill anyone at Chengguang Mansion that day.”

“I can’t, but other people could. If you need me to, I can get everyone he had contact with that night to rush over here in the next two hours. A handbag each will be enough for their trouble.”

Luo Wenzhou stabbed the table with the tip of his pen. “Are you implying that you’ll buy fake evidence with material wealth?”

“What—you’re worried that your elite staff couldn’t tell if a few models were lying?” Fei Du shook his head. “No. I’m telling you why Zhang Donglai couldn’t have been the killer.” He leaned back in his chair again, distancing himself from Luo Wenzhou, and drawled in his uniquely lazy fashion, “If Zhang Donglai wanted to kill someone, it wouldn’t be wise for him to murder them himself. But he could easily have had someone else kidnap, illegally detain, and even secretly murder his target. The West Side is full of migrants—full of people who could leave any day without saying goodbye. One man disappearing this way? No one would notice; nobody would care even if it were reported to the police.”

As Luo Wenzhou listened to this talk of lawlessness, his palm itched uncontrollably, yearning to violently thrash this scumbag. He only managed to restrain himself with great effort, and his pen nib stabbed through his paper with a *rip*, leaving behind an angry gash. “Killers *are* often unwise when committing a murder.”

“Oh—when committing a crime of passion, you mean.” Fei Du paused. “What, were there signs of blunt force trauma on the deceased beyond the blow that knocked him out?”

“Who’s doing the questioning, me or you?”

“Sounds like a no.” Fei Du continued calmly. “In a crime of passion, the killer’s emotional state is explosive; their anger peaks suddenly, leading to a similarly explosive violent outburst. In that situation, a victim lying unconscious and defenseless on the ground would wind up having his head broken like a watermelon. But *strangled*?” Fei Du smiled, his fingertips under his chin, his elbows propped on the arms of the chair. “Strangulation is a long, drawn-out process. It’s a way of savoring the murder; it hints at

the intention to torture. Do you think someone totally parched would have the restraint to sit down and sip their tea slowly? I wouldn't expect that, personally."

Luo Wenzhou's face darkened. "You think of murder like a tea party."

"Oh, don't get all up in arms. It's just a metaphor." Fei Du shrugged casually. "Zhang Donglai wouldn't kill someone. Even if he did, he wouldn't dump the body, and if he did dump the body, it wouldn't be in some narrow alleyway in the West Side that he knows nothing about. That's my analysis. And as for my intuition—I'd say Zhang Donglai is a useless coward. He might lose his temper with someone, but the worst he would do is get into a fight with them and curse them out in public. He doesn't have the guts for murder."

Fei Du's last remarks were the only appropriate things the bastard had said since he sat down.

Zhang Donglai was the son of Director General Zhang's older brother, and as the child of an elderly father who brought him up in a well-to-do household, he'd been spoiled like a prince, becoming delicate and useless. Luo Wenzhou had met him a few times, and Zhang Donglai definitely didn't seem like a man with the guts or mental fortitude for murder. As for the rest, well, only a police investigation could unearth the evidence; there was nothing more to be gained from Fei Du. Luo Wenzhou shut his notebook and stood to leave.

"Hey," Fei Du suddenly called out from behind him.

Luo Wenzhou turned, and a small object came flying toward him. He caught it reflexively and found that Fei Du had thrown him a thumb drive.

“When it comes to criminal cases, there are a few elements that draw public attention,” said Fei Du. “One: An unusually large scale. Terrorist attacks, for instance—those get on the news. Two: Exceptionally strange and cruel methods or serial killings, things that sound like urban legends—those are novelties, after all. Three: Victims from low-risk groups. For instance, students, office workers with regular routines, middle-class people who know their place—projection onto the victim can cause mass panic. Four: Any connections to a source of increasing social conflict—like the power of the state, or social privilege, or the corruption of the elite—stir up debate. Your case has none of these, but somehow, it’s received an unusual amount of attention from the jump.”

A low roar of dying thunder rumbled indistinctly from some far-off place, adding a final, lingering note to his words.

“That kind of attention normally doesn’t last. People lose interest in no time. But now Zhang Donglai is getting dragged in.” Fei Du got to his feet as well. As he passed Luo Wenzhou, he murmured, “Is that a coincidence? Or is someone toying with you?”

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze hardened into stone.

“Save any thanks—I’m doing this for Tao Ran.” Picking up his umbrella, Fei Du walked out at a leisurely pace without looking back at Luo Wenzhou.

“Fei Du!” Luo Wenzhou suddenly called after him. “It’s next week, isn’t it? Seven whole years. It’s time for a new start.”

Fei Du ignored him, not turning around.

Chapter 8

WANG HONGLIANG SHOULD'VE BEEN in his prime,but thanks to half a life spent drinking, he was oldbefore his time. His jowls sagged so freely that they were level with his chin. At a glance, he looked very much like a shar-pei conspiring to destroy mankind. He leaned forward, studying his arrestee through the window, and exhaled enough smoke to fill the whole bureau with heavenly mist.

Ma Xiaowei, on the other hand, looked only too waifish. He was so thin that his face had a pathetic, childish look. Even alone, he was tense, and his eyes—which were so wide they seemed in danger of departing their sockets—darted all over the place, refusing to linger for too long in any one spot.

As Wang Hongliang cocked his head and stared at the kid, he asked the man next to him, "So you're saying they snuck off and brought the guy to the city bureau?"

He was addressing Huang Jinglian, the head of the district bureau's criminal investigation team. Huang Jinglian's presence was invisible when he handled a case; whatever orders he gave simply went with the flow. Like a megaphone amplifying sounds from above, he drew all his conclusions directly from his superiors.

"That's what Xiao Haiyang said," the champion bootlicker answered, lifting an ashtray to receive Wang Hongliang's cigarette.

"Well, who would've thought…? I never expected that. It's such a coincidence that it hardly seems real, you know?" Wang Hongliang broke

into a laugh that obscured his eyes and bared his teeth. “No wonder the fortune teller told me that, despite all the obstacles in my path this year, I’d meet someone important who’d turn my misfortunes into blessings. That talisman was thirty thousand yuan well spent. Xiao Haiyang messes up more than he succeeds, but I guess he *can* be useful sometimes.”

“What do you think we should do next, Director Wang?” Huang Jinglian asked ingratiatingly.

“Luo Wenzhou moves too quickly.” Wang Hongliang ran his fingers through the sparse hairs on his head. “If he’d been a little slower, I could’ve used the fact that the suspect is related to the city bureau chief to get them all out of my hair.” Before anyone could ask him to elaborate, he began to talk to himself, walking in circles. “The case is progressing even more smoothly than I expected now. With a suspect, the investigation’s focus can move out of the West Side. That body was just dumped here, after all. Those people living nearby are at fault for all this—they misled us with their statements and pushed the investigation in the wrong direction. The argument they heard had nothing to do with the case. They can investigate all they want, as long as it’s not in the West Side—I don’t care whether it’s Chengguang Mansion or some other location. We’ll support the city bureau’s work to the fullest. What do you think, Xiao-Huang? The results they found themselves are much more believable than anything we might have intentionally led them to, wouldn’t you say?”

“Very bold and cunning, Director Wang,” Huang Jinglian simpered. “When you have a chance, let me know where you got that talisman—it’s so effective.”

“No problem. Just tell them I sent you and they’ll give you a discount.” Wang Hongliang patted Huang Jinglian’s shoulder and sighed. “You know, when you get to be my age, you realize that there are things you simply have to believe in. Things like promotions and wealth are all up to fate. By the way, didn’t you say the family of the deceased will arrive soon? Send them straight to the city bureau.” As he finished speaking, he glanced at Ma Xiaowei again, then added to Huang Jinglian meaningfully, “Look at that kid. At first glance, he seems so ordinary, but he actually has a very auspicious face—full forehead, shapely chin.”

Huang Jinglian didn’t understand, and his face hinted at his confusion.

Wang Hongliang chortled. “That means he’s got a long life ahead of him!”

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WHILE THE STAFF of the Huashi District Bureaudiscussed the art of divination, the atmosphere overin the Yancheng Municipal Bureau was heavy and gloomy. Tao Ran left the interrogation room, leaned against the wall, and let out a long sigh. Rumor had it that a fever in Zhang Donglai’s childhood had damaged his brain and caused him to grow up into a complete idiot. Tao Ran had to cut him slack about eight times a minute for the conversation to proceed. And Tao Ran was exceptionally patient; if anyone else had interrogated Zhang Donglai, they’d have flipped the table ages ago.

Luo Wenzhou was waiting for him in the doorway, absently twirling a thumb drive between his fingers. “Well?”

“Zhang Donglai says he might’ve had too much to drink that day. He saw some young punk bothering his little sister and assumed it was a pervert, so he beat the other guy up on the spot. He doesn’t even remember who it was; I showed him a photo of the deceased, and all he said was ‘He looks familiar, but I can’t be sure.’ He also says he never gave anyone an apology gift, let alone a phone. I think that part is true—he doesn’t seem to think it’s wrong to beat people up.” Tao Ran pinched the bridge of his nose, a little tired. “By the way, did Fei Du come over?”

“He left already,” Luo Wenzhou replied, then thought back to that conversation and glared at Tao Ran. “That little brat’s getting worse and worse. You spoiled him.”

Tao Ran couldn’t respond to that.

With a flick of his wrist, Luo Wenzhou tossed the thumb drive to Tao Ran, who caught it. “Go have a look at this. There might be something useful in it.”

“What is this?” Tao Ran asked, bewildered.

“Don’t know, but I suspect that it’s security footage from in and around Chengguang Mansion.” Luo Wenzhou glanced at the irate Zhang Donglai on the security camera. “I’ve met his sister. She’s pretty normal. Once you’ve given her a call to see whether she can corroborate his story, I’ll go talk to Director Gen Zhang.”

This time, on his second visit to the director general’s office, Luo Wenzhou didn’t manage to see the man himself. Instead, a stocky man

looked up at him and nodded warmly. “Ah—you’re here.”

The man was around Director General Zhang’s age. He sported an old scar on his right brow; it sliced across his temple to the skin right above his eyelid. Despite the scar, his face wasn’t intimidating; in fact, he had a kindly demeanor. Luo Wenzhou was surprised to see him. “Deputy Lu?”

Lu Youliang, Director General Zhang’s deputy, had been a seasoned criminal investigator who’d risen through the ranks. Even back when the bureau’s forensic technology was primitive, he’d been involved in many major case breakthroughs and in the capture of countless extremely dangerous criminals. He was a legend in the Yancheng Municipal Bureau. In his presence, even the most audacious scoundrel unconsciously smartened up.

“If something’s up,” Deputy Lu said, “you’ll have to tell it to me for now. Lao-Zhang’s distancing himself from this case. And you guys really shouldn’t have brought Zhang Donglai here. Anyone under suspicion should’ve been taken and interrogated in that district’s jurisdiction. What was the point of bringing him here? To protect him for his uncle’s sake, or to make this look even more suspicious?” Sighing, Deputy Lu pointed at Luo Wenzhou. “You’re a good person, Wenzhou, but you get too many ideas. You’re too sly for someone so young.”

This didn’t faze Luo Wenzhou. He looked outside, and his gaze swept the empty stairwell before he reached back and cautiously closed the door. “Uncle Lu.”

Deputy Lu grew still.

“There’s a criminal investigator from the district bureau downstairs. Xiao Haiyang.” Luo Wenzhou began to speak as quietly as possible. “When

he first gave us his report on this case, he said that we couldn't eliminate the possibility that we hadn't found the body in the location of the murder itself. At the time, I thought that claim seemed odd, since we'd usually determine that based on forensic and material evidence. Unless something about a situation is obviously strange, people rarely start discussing that kind of possibility before all the evidence is gathered. Wang Hongliang picked up on that oddness and scolded Xiao Haiyang in front of me. I didn't think too much about it, though. I just assumed Xiao Haiyang was out to lunch."

"I don't quite understand what you mean," Deputy Lu said in a low voice.

"Well, Director General Zhang wanted me to look into Wang Hongliang," Luo Wenzhou replied. "And I've just received word from an informant that they suspect Wang Hongliang of working with the Huashi drug-trafficking syndicate."

Deputy Lu frowned. "Huashi's helped to lead the fight against drugs."

"Yeah, and don't you think it's strange that Wang Hongliang's team always manages to find such accurate informants so easily?" Luo Wenzhou asked in a rush. "My informant says they have an 'officially approved' drug-trafficking network. If you're not in that group, you get caught as soon as you step into the jurisdiction."

"Where's the evidence?" Deputy Lu demanded immediately.

"We're gathering it," replied Luo Wenzhou. "Back to the murder case. Yesterday, we took unexpected statements from residents in that area that they'd heard arguments near the crime scene at around nine o'clock

that evening. At that point, Wang Hongliang went right out and arrested a young man suspected of being at the scene at that time. The kid was skinny, he wouldn't meet anyone's eyes, and he was barely coherent—his statement was full of holes, and he seemed constantly terrified. But however long he was grilled, he was adamant that he hadn't seen anyone else at the scene of the crime. Now we have evidence that the body may have been dumped there after all. Now I'm wondering, if the argument the neighbors overheard wasn't related to the murder, then how come that young man, the suspect, was so afraid to tell the truth? Why did Officer Xiao Haiyang raise eyebrows by implying to us that the scene of the initial crime was elsewhere? Is it possible that he knew from the very beginning that no murder happened there?"

Deputy Lu couldn't contain himself; he rose and began to pace.

"Uncle Lu," said Luo Wenzhou, "there are so many clues here, and they're all convoluted. The details of this case are way too muddy. I suspect the case has something to do with that report I received. Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang found Zhang Donglai by utter coincidence, and if I hadn't brought him straight here, there's a high chance that Wang Hongliang would've used that as an excuse to force the director general and our team to stop interfering. That way, he could've shifted the focus of the investigation. Then he could have arranged for the kid in custody to die from an 'overdose,' disqualifying his statement because he'd made it 'under the influence.' That'd shut the door on the whole affair."

"Luo Wenzhou, do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes," Luo Wenzhou said impassively. "I'm accusing a colleague of committing a crime."

Deputy Lu hesitated. “What do you plan to do?”

“For now, designate Zhang Donglai a major suspect. Once Wang Hongliang sees us apparently shifting the investigation’s focus away from the West Side of Huashi, he’ll probably take advantage of the situation and transfer the case to us.”

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THE CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION TEAM worked overtime on the security footage Fei Du had provided. By the time Luo Wenzhou arrived home, it was late at night. As soon as he opened the door, he heard a meow, and a shorthaired cat peeked out.

Luo Wenzhou stretched out a leg to push him back inside. “What are you meowing about? I didn’t eat either. Hmm…?”

He caught sight of a new parcel in the letterbox at the door. When he opened it, he found a sealed evidence bag full of cigarette butts. Luo Wenzhou stared. He lifted the parcel itself and tipped it over. There was nothing else.

Then his phone vibrated. Someone had sent him a photo of a solemn, deserted stone-paved lane, lying silent and narrow between a body of water and some shrubs. There was a lonely trash can in the center of the image. The text under the photo was neither a descriptive caption nor a sign-off, and it comprised only three words: *by the way*.

Luo Wenzhou studied the photo thoughtfully for a moment, but Lord Kitty next to him was tired of waiting. The cat’s full name was Luo Yiguo;

middle-aged at seven years, he had a round face, large eyes, and sleek, shiny fur. He was perfectly adorable aside from his slightly impatient temperament. Luo Yiguo stretched out a paw and swatted Luo Wenzhou's leg, then walked, butt swaying, to the corner of the room, where he squatted on the floor peevishly, and showed off his empty food bowl to his litter-shoveling slave.

That lumbering idiot only glanced at him, though. He didn't even move! The unthinkably mistreated Luo Yiguo fumed. He charged and rose up on his hind legs to grab at Luo Wenzhou's shin and bite his pant leg, yowling. Luo Wenzhou bent down and lifted him right off the ground by the scruff of his neck. "Got a death wish, you brat?"

Luo Yiguo unleashed an earsplitting howl. His claws flew through the air, and he stuck his tongue out cockily.

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes. He loosened his grip on Luo Yiguo, and the kitty easily freed himself, flipping gracefully through the air to land on all fours.

Very soon, Luo Yiguo received a sufficient quantity of dry cat food, along with a bonus can of wet.

This once again reinforced the completely satisfied Luo Yiguo's belief in the axiom "spare the rod and spoil the child"—you had to bite your litter shoveler to keep him in line.

Luo Wenzhou sat down and caressed his cat carelessly for a while. Abruptly, he looked down at Luo Yiguo's fluffy, upright tail and recalled the beast's origins. Tao Ran had purchased His Lordship from a morning market way back when as a present for the young Fei Du. Fei Du had seemed to like him a lot at first, but after a few days at home with the cat, he suddenly grew tired of him and refused point-blank to keep him. Tao Ran's hometown was far away, and as a new officer who couldn't afford to own property, he moved often. That made it difficult to keep a pet, so he gave the cat to Luo Wenzhou to foster.

Cats, dogs, and noisy children under the age of sixteen—Luo Wenzhou hated them. He despised fostering the cat so much that it drove him crazy, and so he gave Tao Ran an ultimatum: Find the four-pawed nuisance another home within the month, or Luo Wenzhou would boil him into soup.

Seven years passed in the blink of an eye, and no other home was ever found for Luo Yiguo. Luo Wenzhou had devolved from a blustery carnivore into a dutiful, uncomplaining, litter-shoveling slave. Meanwhile, Luo Yiguo rose in status from backup meal to lord of the household. Such was life in this inconstant world.

After contemplating the cat for a moment longer, Luo Wenzhou stood suddenly and grabbed some half-eaten bread from the fridge, then left

again. The streets weren't as congested at this hour, and despite his deep desire to always arrive at and leave work exactly on time, Sergeant Luo now rushed back to the city bureau. As soon as he walked into the office, he found that someone was still there, rubbing his eyes as he scrubbed through the security footage again and again.

Luo Wenzhou's steps paused, and he sighed. "I knew you'd still be here."

Tao Ran stretched. "It's not like I have much else to do at home. How come you're back here?"

"It was so depressing to think of you sad and lonely, working overtime this late at night, that I had to come keep you warm." Luo Wenzhou sauntered over and sat on his desk. "Any new discoveries, Mr. Model Worker?"[9]

"Chengguang Mansion's security cameras are all outdoors. Our tech guys just checked over the footage from eight o'clock to midnight on the twentieth. There were four points where Zhang Donglai clearly appeared on the outdoor cameras. And according to the facial recognition software, there were forty minutes when he was neither inside the club nor within view of the outdoor cameras. Those forty minutes are cumulative, though—he moved out of sight repeatedly, but for very short periods each time. There were only two occasions when he deliberately tried to avoid the cameras. One was around ten o'clock, when he left with a girl for under twenty minutes; he looked up specifically to check for the camera. He did that again near midnight, but Chengguang Mansion's cameras shut off after then, so we don't know what time he came back."

Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin. “They left for under twenty minutes…?”

Tao Ran nodded earnestly. “Yes. But if we find the girl, she can probably vouch for him.”

“Tch.” Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “He was that quick?” This left Tao Ran at a loss for words. But before he could recover enough to react, Luo Wenzhou adopted a more proper tone. “Does He Zhongyi appear anywhere on the recordings?”

“It seems like he doesn’t. This afternoon, our team picked out twenty-odd frames that *could* have He Zhongyi in them, but the cameras never actually caught his face, and some of the frames were from pretty far away. I looked through them, and in my opinion, he’s not in any of them. If the killer really did murder He Zhongyi at Chengguang Mansion, do you think they’d be careless enough to get caught on camera?”

“We didn’t spot He Zhongyi at any of the entrances, either. Maybe he was deliberately avoiding the cameras.” Luo Wenzhou stood and started pacing behind Tao Ran. “But if there really wasn’t anything, Fei Du wouldn’t have brought this footage over.”

“With that many cameras covering four hours… How could he have watched it all by himself?” Tao Ran responded. “Maybe he just gave it to us so that we could check it?”

Luo Wenzhou shook his head. After a moment, a thought came to him. “You said they shut off the cameras after midnight?”

“Yeah. Only the ones near the parking lot and a few small paths outside the club kept running.”

“They probably turned most of them off so that they wouldn’t capture those drunks at their worst, then left the rest on for security.” Luo Wenzhou set his hands on the back of Tao Ran’s chair. “The courtyard cameras were probably in visible places, so guests could easily avoid them if they wanted to. But they might’ve set the cameras outside in darker corners as a precaution against break-ins… Pull up the footage from the cameras that were on all night.”

“That’d make sense,” Tao Ran agreed.

Unlocking his phone, Luo Wenzhou glanced at the photo he’d just received. “Any cameras facing a cobbled road next to some water?”

“Funnily enough, one is.”

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THE CAMERA’S DISPLAY TIME flashed 8:00 p.m. sharp. The screen was pitch-black. As they watched the sped-up recording, the black shadow in the middle of the screen suddenly flapped away, out of sight. It had been a bird.

The four corners of the image captured by the camera were black; only a small patch in the center was visible. Birds darting in and out frequently obscured that patch—maybe the camera was hidden in a birdhouse.

At around 8:50 p.m., a wobbling figure appeared beneath the camera, near the trash can. Tao Ran immediately paused. The figure had probably

come to the trash can to smoke, not noticing the camera in the tree.

"Wait, this guy… He looks a little like He Zhongyi!" Tao Ran studied the figure more closely, then sighed. "If the butts are still there, we could potentially compare DNA to confirm. Then again, it poured rain this afternoon. So now, I guess—what? What are you laughing at?"

Luo Wenzhou reached into his pocket and retrieved an evidence bag full of cigarette butts. "Go get them tested."

Tao Ran was shocked. "How did you… Where did you…"

"Shh. Keep it quiet. We didn't acquire this evidence through the proper channels, so we can only use it to privately confirm our suspicions." Luo Wenzhou put a finger to his lips, then whispered almost inaudibly, "A very annoying young man sent me these."

Tao Ran looked even more shocked. "Fei Du? Did you guys call a truce?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't reply. He placed a hand on the back of Tao Ran's head and turned it back toward the screen. "Any other clues nearby?"

"Oh, right. Hold on," Tao Ran said, digging out a marked map. "This road only leads to two places: Chengguang Mansion at one end and a public space at the other. After this person—potentially He Zhongyi—left, he definitely didn't head toward Chengguang Mansion, so he must have gone the other way… That would've taken him to the main road. There's a bus stop there."

Luo Wenzhou smiled. "I like public places. You can search them anytime without needing to deal with any of those fussy rich folk."

Following the lead, the pair headed straight over to the traffic-police team situated by the bus stop.

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IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT; dew would start to appear at any moment. Luo Wenzhou switched off the car AC and opened the window to let the wind in. “Whatever we find out tonight, don’t tell anyone else. That includes our teammates.”

Tao Ran blinked. “Why?”

“No reason,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I don’t expect it’ll be more than a few days before the district bureau applies for a case transfer, and after that, you can focus exclusively on the He Zhongyi case and set everything else aside. We can keep Zhang Donglai as a ‘suspect’ for a couple more days before we find the true perpetrator. It’ll teach him a good lesson.”

Tao Ran detected an uncommon strain of solemnity in these words. He couldn’t help turning to look at Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou cocked one eyebrow slightly. “What’re you peeking at? Am I too good-looking to resist?”

“Whatever you say, you sad bachelor. I guess teasing me is free—you must be bargain-hunting, huh?” Tao Ran spread his hands magnanimously. “By the way, I haven’t seen you go out with anyone in a long time. What happened to that one you were playing pool with?”

“Oh, we broke up. He went abroad to study.”

“Huh?”

“To study Chinese. In Italy.”

Tao Ran almost choked on his own saliva. “How could he be so frivolous?” Luo Wenzhou shrugged expressionlessly, and Tao Ran sighed. “Be grateful. At least your family isn’t getting on your case.”

Tao Ran’s words and tone let Luo Wenzhou instantly deduce his troubles. “Your family’s pushing you to get married, huh? I’m too handsome, so fate is less kind to me, but why can’t *you* find a partner?”

Tao Ran thought it over, then gave a clipped but emphatic answer: “I’m poor.”

Luo Wenzhou couldn’t help bursting into laughter.

“What’re you laughing at? I can’t compare to you. My salary’s barely enough to pay my mortgage. I’m poor—that’s the objective truth.” Tao Ran ran his fingers through his bird’s-nest-like hair rather indifferently. “But now that I’ve managed to piece together my down payment, I’m finally entitled to be matchmade—I’ll be satisfied with that, I think. It’s not like I need to marry my dream girl.”

Luo Wenzhou flashed his high beams at a road sign and saw that they weren’t far from their destination. “You have a dream girl?” he asked, gazing calmly ahead.

“The girl in the class next door in high school,” Tao Ran said. “She looked like Angie Chiu. We haven’t been in touch in years. She might be married to someone else now. Even if she isn’t, she’d never get married to *me*… We’re almost there. Let me call the guys on duty to let them know.”

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FIVE MINUTES LATER, Luo Wenzhou parked the car. Tao Ran was just about to get out when Luo Wenzhou turned to him and said, “Let me ask you a very serious question.”

Tao Ran stared, bewildered. “What?”

“Let’s just say, hypothetically, that you were a woman. Who would you marry, me or Fei Du?”

“Lao-Luo,” Tao Ran replied with sincerity, “I haven’t seen such a childish romantic rivalry since I graduated from kindergarten.”

“*Hypothetically*.”

Tao Ran paused to think. “If I were a woman, I wouldn’t have time to spare on you two,” he concluded. “I’d be busy stressing over how to come out to my mom as a lesbian.”

“You couldn’t come out of the closet, because all the other women in the world would be dead,” Luo Wenzhou said impatiently. “All the other men would be dead too. It’d just be Fei Du and me. Who would you pick?”

As Luo Wenzhou’s casual words turned six billion people to ash and scattered them in the wind, Tao Ran pursed his lips. “You, then,” he said finally, resigned.

Hearing that, Luo Wenzhou simply couldn’t help it; he smiled the triumphant smile of a fox in a henhouse. “Me? You sure?”

“Of course. You’re the only one I *could* choose.” Tao Ran counted on his fingers. “Fei Du’s still two months too young to marry legally… Hey,

what're you doing?"

Luo Wenzhou put his phone away, smirking as if he'd won a great victory.

Tao Ran didn't understand what he was so smug about. Thinking back on their conversation, he shuddered, his skin breaking into goose bumps.

He shook his head and got out of the car, not seeing that Luo Wenzhou had recorded their conversation on the sly.

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GETTING SECURITY-CAMERA footage was easy enough for city bureau police, so long as that footage wasn't from a private location like Chengguang Mansion.

However, the bus-stop camera failed to confirm what time the man they suspected was He Zhongyi had arrived near Chengguang Mansion. Still, it did offer the two officers another pleasant surprise. The footage showed that at around nine o'clock, the man had walked out of that little lane and straight to the bus stop, where he boarded the number Thirty-Four bus.

In the process, he looked up at the bus-stop sign long enough for Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran to confirm that he was indeed He Zhongyi.

Chapter 9

WHEN THE THERAPIST'S CLINIC closed for the day,the final client rose to bid her a courteous goodbye,taking out a box of elegantly wrapped chocolates as he did so. "Thank you for your efforts, Dr. Bai. I brought you these to try—I thought you might like the flavor."

His therapist was accustomed to this. Her client, Fei Du, certainly knew how to endear himself; he gave sweet compliments with abandon, was never late, never lost control of his emotions during a session, and often brought exquisite, but not inappropriately pricey, little presents with him. Even the clinic's cleaners knew him.

Before she had time to thank her client, she saw his phone vibrate twice. Swallowing her words, she smiled and gestured to him to go ahead. Fei Du gave her an apologetic gesture back.

On his phone, he found two new messages. The first was extremely short: *Thanks*. The text of the second said *Returning the favor*. A sound recording was attached, so Fei Du put the phone to his ear.

"Let's just say, hypothetically, that you were a woman. Who would you marry, me or Fei Du? …All the other men would be dead too. It'd just be Fei Du and me."

"You, then."

"Me? You sure?"

"Fei Du's still two months too young to marry legally…"

Fei Du was dumbstruck.

The counselor was watching Fei Du carefully, and for a brief instant, she noticed a mix of astonishment and annoyance cross the young man's face. It made him look much younger and livelier than usual, catching her off guard.

Fei Du had come to Dr. Bai by way of a referral. His previous therapist, a specialist in children and adolescents, had been her shidi at school. It was impossible to know how many therapists he'd had before that; Fei Du probably barely remembered them all himself. It sounded to Dr. Bai like he'd been seen as a difficult case—a pain to deal with.

Of course, her shidi had spoken with her before bringing her this patient. Dr. Bai's first line of inquiry had been about why Fei Du needed counseling, and what was obstructing the process overall.

"I don't actually know what his problem is," her shidi had replied. "Fei Du is very cooperative. He'll talk about whatever you want him to. I've tried discussing how he lacked care and attention as a child, how his mother died unexpectedly, things like that; he never avoided any topic. He always responded very sincerely. There are times when, if you run out of things to say, he'll helpfully hand you the next topic. Do you know what I mean, Bai-jie?"

Dr. Bai understood what her shidi was implying. The patient *wasn't* cooperating.

In over a decade of experience, Dr. Bai had come across various methods of avoiding cooperation. Some patients started making things up even at the questionnaire stage; some believed there was nothing wrong with them, and that they were only in treatment because their families were forcing them; some even thought themselves experts and tried to turn things

around on their counselors. Psychotherapy was a battle of wits. Counselors weren't all-powerful. There were always going to be people who, for whatever reason, couldn't form a trusting relationship with their counselor, leading to ineffective, failed sessions. Those patients would then be referred out, or else give up on treatment altogether.

And Fei Du was, unquestionably, unique even among unique patients.

He was one of those who lied on his questionnaires, but because he was savvy and had some knowledge of psychology, his lies were irrefutable. In conversation, he spoke candidly and rarely avoided any topics. When a counselor tried to probe, he even described his own unhappiness in clear, logical terms. On the surface, he gave the impression of being perfectly open and frank. Even as a teen, his self-control had been impeccable; when a counselor prodded at a highly sensitive topic, he never showed a hint of defensiveness or aggression. His emotional reactions were always positive.

The issue was that they were *too* positive.

Not even the strongest, healthiest person could maintain such a calm and logical demeanor when discussing such keen, heartfelt pain. It was only the great power of artificial intelligence that required no psychological counseling, just electrical charge. Thus, the sole possibility was that Fei Du wasn't willing to share his true emotions.

Dr. Bai used countless methods, but she never managed to form a truly effective channel of communication with Fei Du. She was forced to admit to him, "This is the limit of my professional expertise. I may not be able to help you at all. But if you still feel you need the help, I can try to find you a better counselor."

To her surprise, Fei Du declined. After over a month of ineffective treatment, the man with more money than he knew what to do with decided to pay double the fee, booking Dr. Bai's final two hours every Wednesday. Before leaving, he'd even tell her sweetly, "I feel very comfortable here. You've helped me a lot." If Dr. Bai wasn't well aware that she was old enough to be his mother, she might even have suspected the young lothario of trying to seduce her.

Sometimes, when daily life was too dull to produce anything worth discussing, Fei Du borrowed books from Dr. Bai and returned them a week later, then struck up conversations about what he'd read. He seemed less like a client and more like a research student she was supervising. Gradually, Dr. Bai observed—though the evidence was minimal—that sometimes, these academic chats allowed Fei Du to express a tiny bit of what he truly thought.

Only a bit, though. And the moment she asked him about it, he would deftly begin to avoid the topic.

It was as if he were sealed away in a fortress, surrounded by impenetrable walls, looking through the glass of the structure's sole window to quietly snoop on the people down below. It required extreme stealth to convince him to cautiously pry the window open even a sliver.

Taking careful measure of Fei Du, Dr. Bai asked, "A friend?"

"Just an acquaintance. Returning a favor with a prank." Fei Du seemed to grind his teeth a little, but then he tucked his phone back into his pocket, quickly adjusting his expression. "Well, I'm off, Dr. Bai. I'll be back to bother you again next week."

Dr. Bai walked him to the door, as always. One hand on the door, Fei Du extended his other hand behind himself, gesturing for her to stop. He'd had a sudden thought.

"Oh, that's right. Next week will probably be my final visit with you, Dr. Bai. I thought I'd better let you know in advance so that you can leave that time slot for someone else."

Dr. Bai was stunned. "Do you feel that you've resolved your problem?" she asked unthinkingly. "And that you won't need to come back?"

Fei Du's sultry eyes curved up in a smile. "Mm-hmm. Recently, I've had this feeling like I've been slowly walking away from where I used to be and trying a new way of living. But I really appreciate the help you've given me all these years."

Dr. Bai laughed bitterly. "I still don't even know where you 'used to be.'"

"It's enough that I know." Fei Du smiled at her. "Talk to you next time."

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YANCHENG'S CITYWIDE license-plate restrictions were still in place the next morning. Luo Wenzhou looked like a delivery man as he rode his noisy old bicycle with cat hairs coating his pant leg—and, in that state, he came face-to-face with his enemy's luxury sedan.

Fortunately, Sergeant Luo was used to abject shamelessness, so he kept calm. He rode his bike with the attitude of an astronaut flying a spacecraft, then slammed his foot down and stopped by the side of the road, lifting his chin at Fei Du. “Is our rich tyrant back to send his love to the traffic police again? I’ll tell them to give you a VIP ticket.”

“Getting a ticket for bringing a friend’s sister in to assist an investigation?” Fei-zong retorted, sounding relaxed. “For a public service, Sergeant Luo, this station certainly seems focused on earning a profit.”

Luo Wenzhou noticed a young man and a young woman behind Fei Du. The girl’s eyes looked reddened, and on closer inspection, her face was a bit similar to Zhang Donglai’s. Turning sideways, Luo Wenzhou got off his two-wheeled space shuttle. “Zhang Ting, is it?”

Zhang Donglai had a little sister named Zhang Ting. Luo Wenzhou had seen her before, but he didn’t know her well; the girl was well-behaved, unlike her ruffian brother, who was often detained for illegal racing.

Zhang Ting was about to speak, but the man next to her stopped her. Before she could say a word, he stepped forward and handed Luo Wenzhou a card. “Hello, officer. I’m Zhang Donglai’s lawyer. I’d like to know the current status of the investigation.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned, his gaze cutting across the lawyer’s face like a blade. When the sergeant was neither speaking nor smiling, his eyes held a cold haughtiness. Instead of taking the proffered business card, Luo Wenzhou glanced at Fei Du, but Fei Du was leaning against the car door, tapping on his phone and distancing himself from the matter.

Luo Wenzhou walked past the lawyer, facing Zhang Ting again. “Have you told your family you’ve hired a lawyer? Does your uncle

know?"

Zhang Ting froze.

Before she could reply, Luo Wenzhou took the lawyer's card and smiled perfunctorily. "You've come so quickly. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours."

"Under these circumstances, the sooner a lawyer intercedes, the better, right?" The lawyer responded with a smile just as fake, refusing to be intimidated. "We defend the involved parties' basic rights."

Suddenly, a weak voice behind him said, "Morning, Sergeant Luo."

Luo Wenzhou turned to see Xiao Haiyang standing by the gate, hugging a stack of folders. Tao Ran had brought him back to the city bureau the previous day, and this morning, he was seemingly self-aware enough to come himself.

"Right on time." Luo Wenzhou smiled at the sight of Xiao Haiyang and pointed backward, telling the lawyer, "You can talk to the officer in charge, then. What's-your-name, come over here."

Before he even had time to react to Luo Wenzhou throwing a random lawyer at him, Xiao Haiyang found himself trapped and thoroughly interrogated. He was completely lost. "Wh…what about Deputy Sergeant Tao?"

Luo Wenzhou gave him a steady smile. "Tao Ran took the day off to deal with something at home. This case is still officially under your bureau's jurisdiction, so it makes the most sense for you to explain, Xiao-Xiao."

Having gotten rid of Xiao Haiyang and the lawyer, Luo Wenzhou finally turned to Fei Du, his face darkening. “What’s all this about?”

Fei Du’s eyebrows rose. “I don’t know. I’m just a driver below the legal age of marriage, giving them a ride on my way.”

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes and glanced at Zhang Ting, who was staring blankly into space. He took his phone out and tapped a few times to retrieve a photo of He Zhongyi. “I’ll keep this short,” he told her. “Seen him before?”

When Zhang Ting’s unguarded gaze fell on the picture, she became so alarmed that she instinctively drew back and hid behind Fei Du. Fei Du grabbed Luo Wenzhou’s wrist. “Be nicer to a girl, won’t you?”

“Zhang Ting,” Luo Wenzhou said, eyeing her. His tone was a touch severe. “This man was murdered two nights ago, and your brother is now a major suspect. This is a homicide case, so every word of your statement will be important. Why are you hiding behind someone who wasn’t involved?”

Zhang Ting shuddered and gripped Fei Du’s sleeve.

“It’s okay, Tingting,” Fei Du told her, bending down a little so that he could speak in her ear. “Just be honest. I don’t believe your brother could possibly have been involved; neither does Sergeant Luo.”

Perhaps thanks to Fei Du’s reassurances, Zhang Ting paused, then took the phone from Luo Wenzhou’s hand. It took her a long time to calm down—her thumbnail was bitten to the quick—but at last, she nodded tentatively.

“The photo is kind of distorted…but I think I’ve seen him before. I’m interning at the Economy and Trade Center, and one day, I went downstairs to buy milk tea and bumped into some weirdo.” She pointed at the photo on Luo Wenzhou’s phone. “It was him. He stopped me and asked whether I knew a Feng Nian-ge.”

Luo Wenzhou’s eyes bored into hers. “As in, his surname was Feng? His full name was Feng Nian or Feng Nian’ge?”

“I don’t know,” Zhang Ting said, sounding dazed. “He had a bit of an accent. I couldn’t tell what exactly the name was, and I don’t know whether the ‘ge’ was part of it, or an honorific. It was kind of late in the day, and he just sprang out at me, saying weird things with that fawning smile… I thought he looked crazy. Nobody was with me, so I was scared. I just kept saying, ‘I don’t know him’ and tried to walk away.”

“When was this?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“A while back,” Zhang Ting replied. “Some crazy flasher was hanging around our office at the time—a lot of people said they’d seen him. The boss wouldn’t let us work overtime because of that, but I had some tasks to finish and stayed longer that day. Not many people were downstairs, and I was nervous to begin with. I wouldn’t have asked my brother to pick me up otherwise.”

Fei Du thought of the delivery man he’d seen at the café. Confused, he couldn’t help asking, “And then? Did he keep bothering you?”

Zhang Ting nodded. “I saw my brother, so I was going to cross the road to avoid the guy. He followed me for some reason, though. I panicked and ran. I yelled, ‘Who are you? I don’t know you.’ They heard me and beat him up. They probably thought he was some pervert.”

“Did He Zhongyi—did the man in the photo fight back?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“No.” Zhang Ting’s gaze fell, as if in pity. “He just held his head and hid. I realized then that he was pretty young, and I’d probably overreacted, so I stopped my brother.”

Fei Du looked up. “You said ‘they’ a moment ago. Who else was there?”

“My boyfriend drove. My brother had had a bit too much to drink.”

“Oh,” Fei Du murmured. Then he adopted a convincingly disappointed expression. “All the nice girls already have boyfriends. Who’s the lucky guy?”

Luo Wenzhou frowned at the sudden and inappropriate detour, but he didn’t shut Fei Du up. Zhang Ting blushed at Fei Du’s flirtatious words.

“Zhao Haochang from Rongshun,” Zhang Ting said plainly. “You know him too, don’t you?”

“Mr. Zhao, from the law firm Rongshun?” Fei Du swept his gaze past her, meeting Luo Wenzhou’s eyes almost carelessly. “No wonder you could get a lawyer so fast.”

“Did you see this He Zhongyi again after that?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

Zhang Ting shook her head. “Sergeant Luo,” she stammered, “there’s no way my brother could kill someone.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression lightened. “If your brother’s innocent, we won’t do wrong by him,” he replied. “Even if we were picking a scapegoat at random, would we pick the old director general’s own nephew? Don’t worry. If your brother would never kill anyone, he’ll be safe here.”

Those words didn't really soothe her. That scoundrel Zhang Donglai was a real piece of work. She'd said there was "no way," but she wasn't certain.

"Go in and have them record your statement," Luo Wenzhou instructed. "I'll ask Lang Qiao to take it. Just tell her the truth. It'll be fine."

Before Luo Wenzhou had even finished speaking, Fei Du walked ahead of Zhang Ting and beckoned her as if coaxing a small child. "Don't worry," he said softly. "I'll be with you."

From the way he doted on his friend's sister, completely at her disposal, *he* could've been her boyfriend. Luo Wenzhou was allergic to the dissolute, womanizing lifestyle of the idle rich. He wanted to sneer, but restrained himself so as not to upset Zhang Ting.

Fei Du walked the young woman into the bureau. When she went in to record her statement, he waited outside, paper cup in hand.

Luo Wenzhou wandered over and sat next to him. "You people lawyer up for every little thing. It really throws us off."

"I wasn't the one who suggested the lawyer," said Fei Du. Just as Luo Wenzhou marveled at this unexpectedly civil, straightforward explanation, the young man followed up by quipping, "If Zhang Donglai really had killed someone, and I wanted to save him, I wouldn't pick a useless lawyer like that. I'd hand another murderer over to the police with an airtight story."

Luo Wenzhou noticed that this bastard's tone was always dark, twisted, and unruly when they conversed, yet always healthy and positive when he spoke to Tao Ran. Neither side of Fei Du seemed genuine. It was

hard to tell when he was being honest and when he was just running his mouth.

"You seem to be under the impression that money is all-powerful." Luo Wenzhou's expression was cold, but his tone was languid, his attitude hovering between joking and serious. "You have some very dangerous views, comrade."

"You don't think money is all-powerful because you've never had enough of it." Then—his expression the same, but his tone changing—Fei Du asked, "Where's Tao Ran?"

"Your guidance was deeply appreciated, Fei-zong," said Luo Wenzhou, "but your means were questionable and inadmissible in court. I had to send Tao Ran out to find evidence we can use. Otherwise, when your lawyer tries to strong-arm us, do we let the guy go or not?"

His words were cryptic and vague; if the walls had had ears, they couldn't have made heads or tails of the conversation. Fei Du knew, however, that Luo Wenzhou was talking about the cigarette butts. He had managed to collect them, but they were considered objects of unknown origin. Even if those had convinced Luo Wenzhou, though, they couldn't convince the court; the police could only use that clue to find others.

"If I hadn't touched them, you wouldn't have gotten them in time. We wouldn't even have known whether the guy in the footage was the victim." Fei Du shrugged. "Someone once told me that 'everything that happens in this world leaves a trace,' but whether those traces are retrievable depends on luck. Think you'll be lucky this time?"

Luo Wenzhou suddenly stiffened. The probing, teasing, vaguely adversarial look on his face vanished, and for a moment, he pressed his lips

together. He reached for the cigarettes in his pocket, then remembered Fei Du's alleged sore throat and put them back. Silence blanketed the pair. Neither looked at the other; they simply sat about three feet apart, like strangers.

"The doors and windows were locked. There was no sign of forced entry in any of the rooms. Your house had the most advanced security features available at the time, and none had been touched," Luo Wenzhou began abruptly. His voice was low, but he spoke quickly. The words slipped out smoothly and without hesitation, as if he were reciting something he'd said numerous times before. "She put on her makeup, changed her clothes, and put the music on. The scene had a sense of ritual, of ceremony. There was a suicide note on the desk next to her, and expert analysis determined that the handwriting belonged to the deceased. The writer had clear depressive tendencies, consistent with her daily use of antidepressants. She was an adult with no major illness that would've led her to lose control of her body. There were no substances in her bloodstream in sufficient quantities to sedate her, and there were no signs of physical struggle. That was all the evidence we gathered. You were the one who made the report; you saw the scene before we did. Unless you're telling me that you hid some other evidence, it was a suicide, no doubt about it."

Fei Du didn't speak. His posture looked completely relaxed: His legs were crossed, his upper body leaned slightly forward, and one hand casually rested on his knee as the other held the no-longer-steaming paper cup. His slender finger tapped a beat on the rim of the cup, almost like the rhythm of a drifting melody that no one else could hear.

“I told you then that everything that happens in this world leaves a trace, if it’s real. If no such traces support what you believe, then no matter how hard you believe it, it’s delusional. A wild-goose chase. Fei Du, you may have extraordinary intuition, but we can’t operate on intuition alone. My intuition tells me every day that I’ll win five million in the lottery.” Luo Wenzhou’s gaze paused on Fei Du’s tapping finger before he continued in a cool, impassive tone. “Did you know in other cultures, they say that someone suicidal will suddenly start telling their nearest and dearest that they love them in various ways? You heard her say that too.”

Fei Du’s finger froze in midair.

Luo Wenzhou stretched out his arm and took the cup from him, setting it to one side. “If you want to discuss that case with me, I stand by my conclusion to this day. But it doesn’t matter who was right—she’s been dead for seven years. The casket’s closed, and so is the case. Even the evidence has been incinerated. Forgive me for mentioning an old superstition, but if she reincarnated, she’d be in elementary school by now. You can keep dwelling on this—that’s just devotion—but there’s no point in this kind of stubborn holding on.”

Fei Du stayed in the same pose, as motionless as a statue.

At that point, Zhang Ting walked out with her lawyer. Fei Du’s gaze finally shifted, making him look alive again.

“I don’t accept your conclusion, Officer Luo,” he said.

Luo Wenzhou, unsurprised by this, simply shrugged.

Fei Du straightened his lapel and stood to meet Zhang Ting and the lawyer. His face was unsmiling, his eyes broody. “That said, your advice

isn’t without its logic.”

This statement startled Luo Wenzhou. Yet after saying that, Fei Du put his mask of elegance back on, escorting Zhang Ting out without another word.

As Fei Du opened the car door for Zhang Ting, he saw a car with official police plates pull up at the entrance of the city bureau. The driver got out first and said something to his passenger, pointing at the bureau. Next, a slight, middle-aged woman wobbled out of the car. She gaped up at the national emblem on the building, her face a mixture of fear and confusion. Her fingers pressed hard against the car door. Beneath her floral-print trousers, her reedlike legs trembled.

The driver closed the car door and helped the woman toward the Yancheng Municipal Bureau. She clutched this helping hand like a drowning man clutching at straws, but she staggered only a few more steps before sinking into a crouch and breaking into gasping sobs. After a moment, howls began to rip from her throat. Passersby stopped to stare, some even pulling out their phones.

Fei Du’s brow creased slightly. He heard Zhang Ting’s lawyer insist to his client, “They don’t have the evidence that could implicate him as a major suspect. Don’t worry, Miss Zhang, I’ll stay here to keep an eye on things, and when the time comes, there’s no way they’ll be able to hang on to him!”

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As Lang Qiao and Luo Wenzhou emerged from the building, Lang Qiao spoke quietly in Luo Wenzhou's ear, giving him the rundown on the woman's identity. "He Zhongyi's mother is diabetic. She's had to undergo dialysis for many years, and he was the only breadwinner in the family." The woman's cries echoed through the city bureau, singularly piercing, and Lang Qiao's heart ached. She furrowed her brow. "Is it okay for her to cry like that? She's unwell to boot. Let's hope nothing happens to her."

Before Luo Wenzhou could reply, another member of the criminal investigation team jogged over. "Boss, the Huashi District Bureau just sent in a report. Since the perpetrator is suspected to have dumped the body, and the scene of the crime is unknown, the district bureau wants to transfer the May twentieth case to us; they claim not to have sufficient jurisdictional power."

"Boss, Yancheng Morning Press is calling. They want to know whether it's true that we caught a suspect."

"Sergeant Luo, the lawyer Zhang Ting brought is questioning the procedure behind Zhang Donglai's arrest. We didn't have enough evidence in the first place. Do we let him go?"

"Sergeant Luo—"

With one gesture, Luo Wenzhou shut everyone up. Hearing the distant cries of He Zhongyi's mother, he picked up his phone. "Go ahead, Tao Ran."

"Wenzhou, I have the footage from the Route Thirty-Four bus."

Chapter 10

"AT APPROXIMATELY TEN AFTER NINE, He Zhongyi boarded the Thirty-Four bus at Nanping Boulevard East. About twenty minutes later, the bus arrived at Wenchang Intersection, and He Zhongyi got off—a nearby camera caught him from behind. A few minutes later, he walked out of the camera's field of vision, and we lose track of him there."

Luo Wenzhou had grown up in Yancheng. The moment he heard the name of the place, he could picture where He Zhongyi had gone. Wenchang Road was southeast of Huashi's central business district—which was to say that after He Zhongyi left Chengguang Mansion, he didn't go home, but instead traveled even farther away.

"I'm at Wenchang Road right now," Tao Ran reported, lifting his phone and raising his voice to be heard over the traffic. "So, from nine to nine thirty, He Zhongyi wasn't in the West Side. That means that the argument the neighbors overheard had nothing to do with the murder. Poor Ma Xiaowei. Why was Wang Hongliang in such a rush to arrest him? Someone who didn't know better would think that the police had killed the victim and wanted a scapegoat."

"Sergeant Luo. Forensics sent over their report." Lang Qiao handed Luo Wenzhou a stack of documents. "They speculate that He Zhongyi died between nine and ten o'clock on the evening of the twentieth."

"Between nine and ten…" Luo Wenzhou flipped through the papers, not responding to Tao Ran. "In that case, He Zhongyi probably met his end not long after getting off the bus."

The background noise on the phone faded a little; Tao Ran had found a quiet spot. “The dinner at Chengguang Mansion ended around nine. The courtyard camera caught Zhang Donglai’s face for the first time as he walked out. He lingered in the courtyard for a while before going back in. At nine forty-five, the same camera caught him again when he came out and spoke to a girl. Then they went to a little grove together.”

Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Sounds to me like Young Master Zhang’s schedule was rather tight. I think he was too busy to have killed anyone.”

“Then, unless he has a twin, we can remove Zhang Donglai from the suspects. Should we let him go?”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t answer. Instead he asked, “What else did you find?”

“Phone records,” said Tao Ran. “It’s strange, I’m telling you. The deceased made several calls while waiting outside Chengguang Mansion, right? I got his phone number from a roommate and checked the call logs. On the night of the twentieth, He Zhongyi called and connected with an unregistered number several times.”

“Oh?” Luo Wenzhou raised an eyebrow. “What’s strange about that? We already speculated that the deceased knew the perpetrator, right?”

“That’s not the strange part,” Tao Ran explained. “That night, around nine fifty, He Zhongyi received a text from a hard-to-trace unlisted number. The message read, *Payment area changed to Golden Triangle lot, May 20*. What do you think that means? Payment? For what? To whom? What’s the ‘Golden Triangle lot’? I think the name sounds kind of—”

Luo Wenzhou cut him off. “Forget that for now. Wenchang Road is in the heart of the old city—it’s full of people. Nine isn’t that late. Grab a team

to ask around and check if anyone saw him."

Tao Ran was taken aback, but before he could say anything more, Luo Wenzhou had hung up. Tao Ran couldn't help frowning at his phone. He'd assumed that Wang Hongliang was just a simple show-off who wanted to pass the buck and get money for no work, requiring them to prevent him from interfering with the investigation and hopefully find a reason to remove him. Only now did Tao Ran begin to sense that this matter went beyond office politics.

The city bureau's criminal investigation team was highly efficient. Within an hour, the officers were all in place, split up into four groups and armed with clear close-up photos of He Zhongyi as they questioned the public in the area. They did this type of work daily when investigating cases; there was no avoiding it, however dull and protracted it was. The irritating process was roughly as tedious as handing out flyers on the roadside. They had to give the same explanation to countless people countless times, yet whether any clues emerged in consequence would be pure luck. The human eye was no security camera, after all; it couldn't catch every passerby.

The city was also far too large, and everyone in it swam on the same tides, leaving early and coming home late. Most of the locals were, at best, nodding acquaintances. Even public transport was full of lowered heads. Through their palm-sized screens, people could watch entertaining farces from overseas or strange happenings from north to south, taking part in discussions of hot topics of every size from all across the country's 3.7 million square miles. Every second of every minute of every hour was incredibly busy, so of course nobody had time to notice one inappropriately

dressed young worker. He was too normal, too dull, unworthy of a glance or even temporary residence in anyone's memory.

This time, the police were out of luck. Tao Ran's crew had started work with the sun high above them, but even when it tumbled down below the mountains in the distance, they were just as empty-handed.

"Nobody saw him on our end, Deputy Sergeant."

"Deputy Tao, we questioned the West End and checked the camera footage from the shops along the street, and guess what we learned? Nothing."

"One old man said he might've seen him, but when I asked where, he pointed me to a construction site."

The trail had gone cold once again. They still had no idea where He Zhongyi had gone after he got off the bus or where he'd been attacked. Less than a year after coming to the big city of Yancheng, the young man of not even twenty had traced a wide arc across the city center, captured on the security cameras' silent films, then vanished and died in an unknown corner. And, somehow, his body refused to rest in death, mysteriously returning itself to the West Side of Huashi. Yet all that had no impact whatsoever on the bustling city and its towering buildings.

Tao Ran had no tricks left up his sleeve. All he could do was dismiss the officers, who'd spent all day baking in the sun until oil oozed from their pores, and provide Luo Wenzhou with a brief report on their failed task.

"I think I'm at a dead end here," Tao Ran admitted. "We should go back to the victim and see what we can deduce from there. Are you outside?"

From the background noise of a radio traffic report, it sounded like Luo Wenzhou was in someone's car. The radio announcer seemed to be describing the city's state of total gridlock in the evening rush hour by iterative method, going through each street in turn.

Luo Wenzhou grunted indistinctly and switched off the radio. "Or maybe we could find a way to follow some leads linked to Zhang Donglai."

"Zhang Donglai?" Tao Ran stared blankly. He'd been speaking all day; his throat was almost smoking from overuse, and his brain was slow. "I thought he'd basically been cleared of suspicion?"

"Zhang Ting said that He Zhongyi stopped her once and asked her about some mysterious person named Feng. If He Zhongyi wasn't mistaken, then that person might be connected to Zhang Ting. On top of that, I'm not sure whether you noticed, but when He Zhongyi left Chengguang Mansion, it roughly coincided with the first time Zhang Donglai emerged from the club. Zhang Donglai clearly wasn't leaving Chengguang Mansion, so what was he doing? Aside from taking a breather?"

Tao Ran hesitated for a moment, then understood. "When the meal ended, some people were leaving, and he walked them out. So what you mean is that the person He Zhongyi wanted to meet may have been among those who left?"

"Ten points—but no prize. There's still the suspicious phone, which was how we found Zhang Donglai in the first place. Considering how that brat acts, he probably doesn't even know how to spell 'apology gift.' But if the phone has nothing to do with him, why did the person who gave it away use his name? Or did the victim lie to his friend? If so, how come?" Having rattled all this off, Luo Wenzhou took a breath, then told Tao Ran, "Look,

you can clock out. Come in early tomorrow morning so that we can question Zhang Donglai again before our forty-eight hours are up. I'll ask Lang Qiao to get a small team and keep investigating He Zhongyi."

Before Luo Wenzhou could hang up, Tao Ran suddenly asked, "Are you in the West Side of Huashi right now?"

Sitting in the unlicensed taxi, Luo Wenzhou paused, then smirked. "Only my wife has the right to ask my whereabouts, Taotao. That kind of question crosses a line…unless you're volunteering for the position?"

Tao Ran ignored his nonsense. "So you're investigating Wang Hongliang?" he asked, then lowered his voice. "I don't care about promotions and getting rich, and I don't care how Director Gen Zhang wants to deal with Wang Hongliang, let alone who the director general after him will be. But if someone's broken the law, catching him is our responsibility, no matter who he is."

"Your duty now is to catch He Zhongyi's killer." Luo Wenzhou laughed. "But all right. Since you have so many questions, I'll tell you, you brat. Wang Hongliang's guilt is still just a hunch. We can't label him a criminal based on a single report, even if he does have a nice blank space on the crown of his head for it. That'd be too sloppy. So I'm doing some groundwork. If there's any solid evidence pointing to him, you guys can get ready to work overtime. You think I'm going to do this alone? Dream on."

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LUO WENZHOU HUNG UP and turned to look at the stiff-backed driver.

The driver still refused to give Luo Wenzhou his full name, calling himself only Xiao-Zhen. Xiao-Zhen wasn't a talker. His entire bearing was rigid with mistrust of every two-legged creature on the planet. When his eyes met Luo Wenzhou's in the rearview mirror, he quickly shifted his gaze away, pretending not to care who Luo Wenzhou was on the phone with.

Luo Wenzhou himself, on the other hand, was quite at ease. "That's the case we're currently investigating. We'll be at liberty to share the details after the investigation finishes, but it's still in progress, so please keep it secret for now."

Xiao-Zhen avoided his gaze. "What're you talking about? I don't understand."

Through his sunglasses, Luo Wenzhou quietly eyed the young driver. "You told me before that your sister died because of Wang Hongliang and that drug-trafficking syndicate, but I looked into it, and she was apparently arrested for prostitution and then died of an overdose later. Chen Zhen, this case involves the head public security official of a whole district and several of his subordinates. We can't open an investigation on your word alone."

When he said Chen Zhen's full name, the young driver panicked. He braked hard and pulled over to the curb.

Luo Wenzhou's expression was unchanged. "If you're fined for illegal parking, I won't help you get out of it."

Chen Zhen's face was white as a sheet. He glared at Luo Wenzhou with a mixture of shame and fury. "My sister wasn't like that."

Luo Wenzhou was unmoved by this. He rapped on the window. “I need *evidence*,” he said, enunciating every syllable.

“She didn’t manage to tell me anything,” Chen Zhen replied. “But back then, she couldn’t sleep for nights at a time. Day after day, it seemed like she was scared of something. When I asked, though, she got mad at me and told me to butt out. I…I overheard her on the phone with someone…”

Luo Wenzhou looked up. “Who?” Chen Zhen bowed his head and wiped his eyes, shaking his head rapidly. Luo Wenzhou grabbed a tissue and handed it to him. “Have you ever heard of the ‘Golden Triangle lot’?”

Chen Zhen stiffened.

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IN FEI TOWER, the secretary knocked on Fei Du’s office door. “Fei-zong, Mr. Zhao from Rongshun is here. He says he has an appointment with you.”

Fei Du nodded. “Yes, he does. Please show him in.”

In all her time working for Fei Du, the secretary had never had to work late, nor had she ever seen him meet a guest for work at this hour. She couldn’t help but find it a novelty. Smiling, she showed the guest into Fei Du’s office and poured him a drink, secretly assessing him.

Mr. Zhao was exquisitely dressed. Though you could call him tall and handsome, there was something smoothly feminine about his features, and it all combined to give him an oddly innocent air. The secretary had always

known that Mr. Fei was a player with both men and women and that he was especially fond of quiet, innocent types—those who weren't overeager. Seeing Mr. Zhao, she had a sudden epiphany, and was still in the middle of it when she met Fei Du's ambiguous, half-smiling eyes. The secretary stuck her tongue between her teeth, hurriedly reminding herself that her position was essentially as "palace steward" to his harem. It was her duty to keep her eyes on her work as well as to bow down and pay obeisance.

The Fei Corporation had hired Rongshun as its legal consultant on several specific projects. Resting his chin on his palm, Fei Du listened to Mr. Zhao run through the details of several documents with great fervor before cutting him off heartlessly. "How's Tingting?"

Mr. Zhao froze, apparently surprised by how briefly the rich-but-useless heir had bothered to play pretend. Still, he quickly recovered, and his expression didn't change as he put down the materials he'd spent so much time preparing. "My colleague in criminal law tells me that there isn't enough evidence for the police to keep Zhang-zong in custody, so he'll probably be out by tomorrow. It'll be fine. Tingting just had a little scare. Thanks for asking."

"It's not just her I'm worried about." Fei Du smiled at him. This smile seemed to say any number of things that his lips didn't. "It seems like it's useful in a crisis to know a few handsome young prodigies like yourself, Mr. Zhao. Would you do me the honor of staying for dinner?"

Mr. Zhao's eyebrows furrowed; he looked ready to decline. Fei Du, however, had already risen to his feet and now gestured invitingly to him, indifferent to his response. The Fei Corporation was Rongshun's biggest client; the two entities had been partners even before Fei Du took over the

corporation, and Fei had always been a major backer of Rongshun. Zhao Haochang couldn't refuse this courtesy. Reluctantly, he stood.

"I don't know whether you have any dietary restrictions, but I asked them to have a few dishes ready," Fei Du said nonchalantly, leading the way. "By the way, Haochang, where's your family from? Are you local?"

It was the easiest opener to casual conversation, but Zhao Haochang suddenly froze. Fei Du detected that odd stillness and turned, confused. Only then did Zhao Haochang grunt noncommittally, avoiding Fei Du's gaze.

Chapter 11

IT WAS MAY 24. Four days had passed since the murder of He Zhongyi, a youth who lived on Huashi's West Side. Wearing gloves, Luo Wenzhou flipped through an old photo album he'd received from the unlicensed taxi driver Chen Zhen.

Chen Zhen and his sister, Chen Yuan, were twins. They'd been raised in Yancheng by their grandparents until the old couple passed away, first one and then the other. Chen Yuan later went to university, but Chen Zhen, whose grades were subpar, quickly gave up on academics and joined the workforce.

The girl in the photos was delicate and graceful. She smiled in every photo, exposing two little canine teeth that weren't quite symmetrical. This album was the only thing she'd left behind. The circumstances of her death were mysterious and the cause unseemly. The police had ransacked her personal effects repeatedly, claiming that they suspected her of hiding and dealing drugs, and Chen Zhen hadn't been allowed to keep his sister's secondhand computer or phone.

Luo Wenzhou flipped through the entire album and found a few photos that appeared to be souvenirs from some college society activity. In those photos, one girl in particular appeared very close with Chen Yuan, and on the back of one was penciled the date and a message: *Joined the tea-culture society with Xiao-Cui. Grateful to have met you.*

"Xiao-Cui." Luo Wenzhou opened the phone logs he'd retrieved. About half a month before her death, Chen Yuan had been on a phone call

with someone named Cui Ying.

Then Lang Qiao knocked on his office door and beckoned him wearily. “Boss. Come to the great moron show. Ten yuan a ticket: Guaranteed idiocy, or your money back.”

Yancheng Municipal Bureau’s criminal investigation team had collectively identified Young Master Zhang’s area of expertise: complete bullshit. Nine times out of ten, that was what came out of his mouth. Being held in the bureau for forty-eight hours had burned away what few brain cells he had; now, he was using whatever was left in that hollow shell to speak at a level of intelligence that profoundly rocked any listener.

“Feng Nian-ge? Don’t know. I don’t know anyone named Feng. Are they a man or a woman? Tell me what they look like. Maybe I slept with them and forgot their name…

“Was anyone I knew at Chengguang Mansion on the night of the twentieth? I knew everybody. What? Who was there? Aw, now, officers, officers! They poured a gallon of baijiu down my throat that night, god-knows-how-much red wine, and half a dozen glasses of champagne. All three of those together, and I’m impressed I remembered who *I* was! There’s no way I could tell you who else was there…

“No, I haven’t been fighting with anyone recently. I’m such a nice guy. Huh? Physically beating people up counts? Oh, well, I don’t know, then. If I beat them up, then I beat them up. Who’s going to retaliate? They’ve got to know who I am, right…?

“How many times do I have to say it? I didn’t give him that phone. I never give anyone something unless I’m interested in them. Even if I did, I wouldn’t give someone a shitty phone. That’d be such an insult!”

Beyond sleeping and spending money, Young Master Zhang's daily life was chaos. Everything, whether big or small, passed by him like smoke and dissipated before it could make any impression on him. His mental state approached the Buddhist ideal of liberation from worldly things. Luo Wenzhou listened in for a while, then finally shared his judgment of Zhang Donglai with the team: "That kid's father must've dropped him on the head when he was little."

Armed with all the patience in the world, Tao Ran tried various angles of questioning, but he still failed to squeeze even a drop of useful information out of Zhang Donglai's random-access memory. Before long, their time was up, and the lawyer Zhang Ting had found was at the bureau entrance, pushing strongly for the police to let Zhang Donglai go.

"I've exhausted my abilities." Tao Ran heaved a long sigh, then another.

Luo Wenzhou paused, then lifted his chin slightly. "Insufficient evidence. Let him go."

"Sergeant Luo!"

"Boss!" Lang Qiao seized Luo Wenzhou. "Boss, so many busybodies caught He Zhongyi's mother on camera outside yesterday, wailing. Now the gossips are all waiting to see what's going to happen. If you let him go, what'll they say out there?"

"We can let Zhang Donglai go." Tao Ran thought for a moment, then added a suggestion. "Based on the victim's time of death, and the path he took before he was killed, we can say that Zhang Donglai's alibi is—"

"No," Luo Wenzhou interrupted. "Announce that there was insufficient evidence. Don't disclose details of the investigation to the

public. Let him go first."

Hearing his apparently arbitrary decision, Lang Qiao couldn't help demanding, "Did Zhang Donglai infect you, Boss? Even through the glass? That's some highly contagious brain damage, don't you think?"

Luo Wenzhou rapped the back of her head. "Who taught you to be so cheeky? The more you talk, the quicker you'll get smile lines."

Tao Ran simply thought the situation over for a moment before saying pensively, "You mean…"

"Mm-hmm. From now on, nobody's allowed to share any details on the investigation or its progress. Just say 'Not enough evidence… No comment… We're re-examining every personal relationship the deceased had throughout his life.'" Luo Wenzhou nodded at Tao Ran, then added blandly, "I'll deal with anyone who leaks anything. That's a promise. Dismissed."

The nephew of the city bureau chief had been a suspect in the young laborer's strange death, and now he was being released due to "insufficient evidence." That news was even more explosive than Lang Qiao and the team feared. Even before they could complete the release procedure, various members of the media were already crowding on their doorstep.

The criminal investigation office phone had turned into a hotline, with calls coming in one after another. Even Deputy Lu, sitting in for Director General Zhang, was concerned; he called Luo Wenzhou in for an explanation. "Are you sure you can handle this?" he asked Luo Wenzhou, glancing gravely through the window at the media personnel being held outside reception.

Luo Wenzhou gave him a carefree smile. “It’s *me*. What’re you worried about?”

Deputy Lu rolled his eyes. “If you hook a big fish, be careful it doesn’t drag you back down with it. We’ll be under heavy pressure from the mayor over the next few days, but I’ll hold that off for you while you do what you have to.”

“Thanks, Uncle Lu.” Luo Wenzhou paused, then lowered his voice. “Don’t worry about Wang Hongliang. He’s only lasted this long because nobody’s ever looked into him. I doubt he’s powerful enough to hide the truth.”

Deputy Lu pursed his lips and looked at Luo Wenzhou, growing serious. “If you can verify the intel you received, it won’t matter how deep his roots are or who wants to protect him. As long as Lao-Zhang and I are here, we can take care of him. But be careful, understand?”

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WHEN LUO WENZHOU went downstairs, he ran into Zhang Donglai’s committee of family and friends. To keep things as low-key as possible, no immediate family members came to receive Zhang Donglai except Zhang Ting. But children stemmed from karmic debt, and were destined to be either a blessing or a curse to their parents—and sure enough, things weren’t low-key as Zhang Donglai’s parents had planned. Somehow, Zhang Donglai’s no-good friends had caught wind of what was happening, and they stormed the bureau, happy to wreak havoc and cause a fuss. It had

begun with several luxury cars blocking the bureau's entrance and a flock of flashy people pouring in. It was anyone's guess whether they were there to show off or embarrass themselves.

The lawyer rolled up his sleeves, preparing to liberate Zhang Donglai, while Zhao Haochang stayed glued to Zhang Ting's side. Juxtaposed with the otherwise disgraceful group, the young couple stood out as refined and understated.

Of course, Fei Du was there too. This time, though, the usual leader of the wastrels looked as if he was truly uninvolved, standing next to Zhang Ting inconspicuously. When Luo Wenzhou saw Fei Du, he was dressed just as flashily as the others, but he had his headphones in and was focused entirely on a very old PSP. Luo Wenzhou had been about to throw all these ghoulish characters out, but as soon as he spotted that scratched, worn-out old console in Fei Du's hands, his expression softened. For once, he didn't open with a wry barb; he walked peaceably over to Fei Du and peeked over his shoulder.

Big, adorable eyeballs were running across the screen. This domineering chairman was playing a heated game of *Patapon*.

Just as Fei Du was about to win a battle and complete a mission, the blustering Zhang Donglai made his grand entrance. He had a spring in his step, and before he even left the station, he bellowed overexcitedly, "Everyone here today is a brother who's gone through life and death with me! If you need me someday, just say the word, and I'll gladly take a stabbing for you! Several, in fact! I'll turn myself into a knife block!"

Fei Du's eyeball army had been maneuvering flawlessly through the game, but Zhang Donglai's earsplitting screeches distracted him from the

precisely timed beats, and Fei Du's army was defeated.

Luo Wenzhou managed to restrain himself until he saw the "Game Over" screen. Then he drawled, "The one thing I can never understand is why you hang out with Zhang Donglai and his gang."

Fei Du casually stuffed the PSP into his pocket. "Because I think he lives a very philosophical life."

Luo Wenzhou couldn't tell whether Fei Du meant that as praise or an insult. When Zhang Donglai ran over, Fei Du waved at him, then turned to give Luo Wenzhou a patently fake smile.

As the gaggle of rich kids sauntered out of the station, it took the imagination of a toenail to picture the frenzied reporters waiting outside. Lang Qiao already knew this would be the next week's hottest trending topic. She covered her eyes and whispered to Tao Ran, "I can't even look."

Tao Ran sighed. "Don't. Let's get to work."

Just as Zhang Donglai's group walked out the door, a figure suddenly dove into their midst. The woman was slight, her hair faded and lifeless—it was He Zhongyi's mother.

The hooligans' leader eyed the comically dressed woman for a moment. "Who's that?" someone whispered.

He Zhongyi's mother swept her bloodshot eyes across each face. Her lips trembled hard. "Who killed my son?" she asked in a voice as muffled and raspy as a newborn kit's. Her accent was thick and her pronunciation unclear; it took her three or four repetitions for people to understand what she was saying.

Zhang Donglai's face darkened slightly. "Who knows? Wasn't me," he retorted.

Then, avoiding her gaze, he brushed past her to leave. His entourage quickly followed, giving the woman a wide berth on both sides, as if she carried disease.

"Is she mentally disturbed?"

"Keep it down. She looks so pitiful."

"Shouldn't you pity *me*? I was locked away for no reason," Zhang Donglai protested. "I was treated more unfairly than Dou E.[10] I didn't even know that lady's kid."

The woman stood helplessly to one side, staring in bewilderment at those walking past her, who were giving her a wide berth. "Who killed my son? You…you can't leave…"

Watching the crowd disappear, she panicked and threw her hands up, grasping at the air. In the process, her fingers accidentally caught a girl's hair. The girl shrieked like an animal whose tail had been stepped on and leaped three feet into the air. She yanked her hair back toward her chest, then ducked behind her friend.

A young man reached out instinctively to stop the older woman. "What's wrong with you? Are you crazy?!"

Slamming against the man's solid arm, the woman fell backward. As she toppled to the ground, she collided with Fei Du, who was walking out last.

Fei Du—who'd just been saying goodbye to Tao Ran—started in shock as the woman knocked against him, and he took an involuntary step

backward. Before he could react further, the woman clawed and grasped at his expensive trousers. “You can’t leave! None of you can leave! You need to give me an explanation…” she rambled. “You can’t leave…”

Some police officers came to stop her, and the young man who’d knocked her over came over too, frowning. “Lord Fei…”

An innocent civilian caught in the crossfire, Fei Du furrowed his brow at the woman grabbing him. He patted her shoulder awkwardly. “Why don’t you get up for now?”

The woman looked up abruptly, meeting Fei Du’s eyes. She was howling and sobbing in a deeply unbecoming manner, tears streaming down her face as her anguish reduced her to a crumpled shell of herself. Suddenly, Fei Du froze, staring down at her as if he saw someone else in her gaze.

He bent down, grasped her shoulders very gently, and helped her get up. Then he waved to Zhang Donglai and the rest.

“You guys go ahead,” he told them.

Chapter 12

"I HATE LOOKING INTO VICTIMS." Lang Qiao pouted, balancing a pen under her nose. "There's no smoke without fire, sure—but, a lot of the time, a victim's just hurt for no reason at all. I can't figure it out for the life of me. Like—why? Why should a perfectly fine person be so unlucky as to meet his end like that? Why should someone who worked so hard for so many years die so soon because of some random piece of human scum? Then again, if the victim himself wasn't innocent, or if he was getting his just deserts for something, I'd say 'well deserved'! But in that case, hunting down the perpetrator would feel like taking the wrong side, so I—ow!"

Luo Wenzhou had rolled the documents into a tube and swatted the back of her head with them, derailing her lengthy one-woman show.

"Why'd you hit me?" Lang Qiao cried, holding the back of her head. "The thoughts I'm voicing are human nature! Police are human too!"

"Do you want your salary and bonus?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

"Yes…"

"Then do your work. What's with the melodramatic monologue?" Luo Wenzhou yanked a whiteboard over with one hand. Under a photo of the boy with the crescent-shaped scar on his temple, he wrote, *He Zhongyi, male, 18, delivery man, from H— Province* and similar basic info. Then, taking advantage of his height, he looked over the little whiteboard and out through the office's clear glass window at Fei Du, who was still outside with He Zhongyi's mother.

The woman must've heard a wild rumor about the case somewhere; Zhang Donglai's release had driven her to despair. She'd cried herself to pieces, seemingly certain that her grievances would go unheard. It appeared that she'd practically needed Fei Du to pick her up and carry her in. Maybe she had an instinctive need to grasp at straws; maybe she'd decided that Fei Du was one of Zhang Donglai's people, and so she couldn't let him leave—whatever it was, when her mind went blank, it was Fei Du's clothes she had grabbed instinctively.

In a dramatic turn of events, that forced Fei Du to stay—hence the scene outside their window.

Throwing off this frail woman would've been easy for a robust young man like Fei Du. It was surprising that, instead, he just decided to sit down with this ugly old woman and keep her company.

He Zhongyi's mother did recover from her breakdown, regaining some of her senses, and Luo Wenzhou watched Fei Du take her hand and bend down to speak quietly with her. Whatever sweet words he cajoled her with, He Zhongyi's mother gradually calmed; she could even answer him with nods and shakes of her head.

"Has Ma Xiaowei been released?" asked Luo Wenzhou, still staring out the window.

Tao Ran put down the phone. "No. The district bureau told me that Ma Xiaowei was in withdrawal, and the police recovered a lot of loose drugs in his accommodations, so they've kept him in custody."

"Can we bring him in for questioning?"

Tao Ran shrugged. "No. That suspect is apparently extremely unstable, and the district bureau doesn't want to risk anything happening to

him. If we want to question him, we'll have to send someone over."

Wang Hongliang had seemingly decided not to allow them to talk to Ma Xiaowei alone. They could look at him through a window, but take him away? Not a chance.

Two officers walked in with a cardboard box. "Boss, we brought all of He Zhongyi's personal effects back. We can give them to his family once we're done looking through them. Some might be useful, though. Take a look."

He Zhongyi didn't have many personal belongings. There were a few garments—mostly work clothes his delivery company provided to all their staff. There were also some basic daily necessities and—in the phone box Ma Xiaowei hadn't been able to bear to throw out— a diary. Well, it was a diary in name, but there wasn't much in it—just bookkeeping and notes.

Beyond making deliveries, He Zhongyi had evidently had frequent short-term temp gigs; he'd consistently received extra income in bits and pieces. Added up, his monthly earnings were close to a low-level office worker's. His bookkeeping was very detailed, including even things like a two-and-a-half-yuan breakfast. Luo Wenzhou flipped through a few pages, then suddenly stilled. "What'd that paper on the victim's head look like? Let me see."

Someone nearby quickly fished out a close-up shot and passed it to him. The word "money" was written in messy strokes, as if in a child's handwriting. The curve at the end was so large it took up almost half the word, making the whole thing very lopsided. It was the same way the word was written in He Zhongyi's accounts.

“This character is in the victim’s own handwriting.” Tao Ran looked thoughtful. “I remember He Zhongyi holding a brown paper bag when he appeared at Chengguang Mansion. Was there a note in that bag? It went missing later on—what was inside it?”

Luo Wenzhou skimmed He Zhongyi’s notebook. “I think it might well have been money. Look here.”

He Zhongyi’s accounts showed a debt of a hundred thousand yuan.

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OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, Fei Du asked He Zhongyi’s mother, “You spent almost a hundred thousand yuan on medical expenses? That *is* a lot. But Zhongyi had only just arrived in Yancheng and started working. Where did *he* get all that money?”

“He said he got an advance from his ganger,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Ganger?” Fei Du wasn’t familiar with that term; he paused for a moment to process it. “You mean, his supervisor where he worked?”

On top of her illness, He Zhongyi’s mother was a farm woman with very little exposure to the world beyond her village. She didn’t understand the transitory, difficult relationships between laborers and their bosses. Both parties were afraid of the other disappearing at any time, so most laborers were paid by the day, and while their wages might be late, they were never paid in advance.

Even if an employer was to try to gain good karma by paying advance wages in an emergency, one or two months' worth would already push the limit of duty. He Zhongyi's mother's medical expenses would've taken a delivery man years to earn. Such an enormous debt would've been impossible to repay by labor alone, except maybe if the indebted person sold his body. And—not to disrespect the dead—Fei-zong's objective opinion when he recalled his one interaction with He Zhongyi was that the young man's looks wouldn't have fetched a price high enough.

So who'd lent him that money? And why hadn't he told the truth, even to his own mother?

***

THE CITY BUREAU'S entire criminal investigation team searched for the mysterious creditor, but after half a day of questioning his coworkers and the people around him, they'd encountered only confused faces. Nobody admitted to lending him the money; nobody even knew that he'd borrowed it.

When Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran returned to the bureau, they saw He Zhongyi's mother curled up across a few chairs, fast asleep. Fei Du had somehow obtained a thin blanket from someone and settled it over her. Tao Ran walked over. "Why's she sleeping here?" he asked in a low voice.

"I suggested she go to a hotel, but she said no. She wants to stay until you catch the perp." Fei Du looked up. Seeing Tao Ran covered in sweat, he

pulled a tissue from his pocket and handed it over. “Do you always work so hard? It pains me to see you like this.”

Before Tao Ran could respond, Luo Wenzhou retorted coldly, “That’s what being a cop is like. If it upsets you, pay more taxes and cause less trouble. But, Fei-zong, I thought you company presidents had hectic schedules. Why do you always seem to have so much time on your hands?”

Fei Du smiled. “I have a team of professional managers. They’re not just there to shoot their mouths off. Thank you for your concern about my finances, Officer Luo, but it’s completely unnecessary. If I squandered my entire family fortune and put the petty change in the bank to collect interest, I’d still have more than what you’ll make in a lifetime.”

Tao Ran was speechless. These two morons couldn’t be at peace for more than three minutes without butting heads. He pushed the two fighting roosters apart, shoving Luo Wenzhou into the office with one hand and pointing a warning finger at Fei Du with the other.

Luo Wenzhou fumed, the flames of his fury ten yards tall. “That brat —”

Tao Ran shut the office door. “After work, you two can go out and fight all you want.”

“Oh?” Luo Wenzhou said, picking up the hint in his words. “You’re busy after work?”

Tao Ran turned and glanced at him. “I’m going on a blind date.”

“Huh?” Luo Wenzhou stared blankly.

Tao Ran patted his shoulder. “I’m at that age, my man. I can’t be single like you guys anymore.”

It took Luo Wenzhou a long time to recover, but when he did, he broke into an irrepressible grin.

Experienced and practical writers specializing in human emotions often warned in their works that one shouldn't show off a win, lest they repel others. Luo Wenzhou disagreed. The whole reason he kept certain people close was because seeing them happy made him happy—even if they rose to career heights meteoric enough to take them farther and farther away from him.

That said, Tao Ran's only hope of reaching great heights in this lifetime was lottery tickets.

Luo Wenzhou pointed at Tao Ran. "You traitor!" he half joked. "Betraying us without saying a word! Our everlasting squad of bitter singles won't let you get away with this."

Tao Ran paused. "How about I bribe you with this? If I have a kid, you'll be the godfather."

"No—*please* no!" Luo Wenzhou held up his hands. "Luo Yiguo is enough. I'm not addicted to fatherhood. Anyway, if you're busy, go on ahead. It's not like we'll find any new clues just by wasting time here. If the killer's been following the developments around Zhang Donglai and the case, I think they'll do something in the next couple of days. We'll investigate while we wait."

Tao Ran nodded, but just as he collected his things to leave, Luo Wenzhou called out his name.

"Now that you've turned your back on us, I almost feel like I've been dumped," the sergeant muttered. Then he changed his tone and added,

“How are you getting to your date, you broke bastard? Want to borrow my car?”

“Buzz off!” said Tao Ran.

As soon as he was out the door, he saw Fei Du waiting there for him, hands in his pockets.

After all the ruckus, busybodies still lingered near the entrance, woodpecker-like. Following the bureau’s release of a wealthy but highly suspicious heir, Fei Du could almost see the pressure on the criminal investigation team shimmer in the air. He’d been prepared to wait an eternity for Tao Ran and was startled to find him leaving work with surprising alacrity.

Tao Ran spoke first. “I’m done for the day. Are you leaving?”

Fei Du blinked. He looked at the woman curled up on the chairs. “What about her?”

Tao Ran was conflicted.

“It’s fine,” Luo Wenzhou told the deputy, walking out and leaning against the doorframe. “When she wakes up, I’ll ask her if she’s willing to stay at the hostel near the gate. It’s usually used by public security staff on work trips, so it’ll be safe and cheap. I can get her a room there. If she refuses, we can just get the officer on duty to put up a makeshift bed here.”

Tao Ran hesitated. “That’s against the rules, isn’t it?”

“Rules aren’t alive—people are. I just need to pull some strings, that’s all.” Luo Wenzhou waved him off. “Nobody worries as much as you do. Go ahead.”

“Huh? Tao Ran, do you have something going on tonight?” Fei Du asked, taken aback.

“Um…” Tao Ran thought for a moment, then decided to be frank. “I managed to save enough for a down payment on an old apartment, so since I have my own property now, I’m going to meet up with someone from my home province tonight. Someone my relatives set me up with.”

Naturally, that “someone” was a woman.

Ever since he was going on fifteen, Fei Du had been left to his own devices on holidays, so he always ran off to Tao Ran’s place. It was a perfectly convenient arrangement between a young bachelor and a teenager with no one to turn to; they could just boil a pot of noodles, and that’d be enough for a meal.

If Tao Ran had a family, though, things would be different.

Fei Du’s eyelashes trembled slightly. He had matured into a pretentious member of society’s elite, so wildly different from the poor little creature he’d been back then. He was now intelligent, degenerate, well-connected, crafty…and rich with inherited wealth. He was far more impressive than Tao Ran, a nobody of a cop. He didn’t need looking after anymore.

“When I first met you, you were only this tall, curled up in my car hugging your schoolbag,” Tao Ran said to Fei Du, raising a hand to draw a line in the air. “The third time I called your dad’s phone, the line was still busy, and you looked up at me… Back then, I thought to myself, *I need to take care of this boy*. And now you’re all grown up.”

“Ge,” Fei Du said suddenly—a term of address he hadn’t used for Tao Ran since coming of age. Tao Ran was stunned. “Was I getting in your

way?"

"What're you talking about?"

Fei Du seemed to consider his words for a moment. Then he said cautiously, "I've been thinking lately—in a year or two, you might get married and have kids. If you do, I can't cling to you all the time anymore. My therapist says that things like friends starting families or moving away, or loved ones getting old and passing on, aren't unexpected. They're the natural order of things, like sunshine and rain and snow—objective constants with no inherent meaning. Wallowing over those things is like moping about the passing of the seasons. There's no point. The world changes, people change, and even the self is ever-changing. It's illogical to reject change and separation. Whatever happens, you'll always be 'Ge' to me."

His statement stole Tao Ran's words from him in one fell swoop, not even leaving him a punctuation mark. With nothing to add, Tao Ran just asked dully, "You've been seeing a therapist…?"

Fei Du raised an eyebrow. "It's the hot new trend for the capitalist class to get therapy regularly, isn't it? The same way members of the public like to crack open a top-shelf mineral water?"

Much like Fei Du's employees, Tao Ran found himself reassured by Fei Du's words despite knowing that the young man was just spouting nonsense.

"Are you meeting an old lover?" Fei Du asked in a more casual tone. "Or did someone set you up on a date?"

"The latter."

Fei Du's lips twitched as he swiftly swallowed the "That's so old-fashioned!" on the tip of his tongue. He sighed. "All right, then, how are you getting there? You're not going to walk, surely? Do you need to borrow my car? And are you wearing *that*?"

Tao Ran the mortgage slave reeled from the second blow in ten minutes. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Enough, you two! Did you make a joint decision behind my back to make fun of me for being poor?"

Hearing Tao Ran's complaint, Fei Du reflexively looked up straight into Luo Wenzhou's eyes. The expressions on both their faces turned inscrutable, and they broke eye contact immediately.

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EVEN AFTER TAO RAN LEFT, however, Fei Du lingered. Only when Luo Wenzhou called the officer on duty over right in front of him to work out accommodations for He Zhongyi's mother did Fei Du finally hand the woman his business card and turn to go.

Luo Wenzhou didn't know what was wrong with him. Maybe it was that Fei Du looked so empty and alone when he turned to leave; maybe Tao Ran's few words of reminiscence had brought back memories of that teenager who'd called the police all those years ago. Whatever it was, an impulse overcame him, and he called out to Fei Du. "Hey, you don't have anyone to eat dinner with tonight, do you?"

Fei Du turned, and promptly stomped on Luo Wenzhou's momentary hallucination of his spiritual purity. "I don't. For once, in an extraordinary turn of events, I'm alone like you old empty nesters," he replied obnoxiously.

His attitude made Luo Wenzhou's hand itch; he wished he could go back five seconds and slap himself before he could run his mouth. Unfortunately, what was done was done, and trying to take it back would be petty. "You helped us to comfort the deceased's mother today," Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly, "and you stopped her from blabbing to the press. You helped us. On the criminal investigation team's behalf, I'd like to ask you to stay for dinner."

Fei Du's steps paused, and a stunned look came over his face.

When Luo Wenzhou extended this polite invitation, he didn't expect Fei-zong to actually deign to grace him with his continued presence. And Fei Du, for his part, didn't expect Sergeant Luo's "stay for dinner" to be so literal: They ate in the bureau cafeteria.

Fei-zong stood silently at the entrance of the cafeteria, taking in the mysterious riddle of its odors. His eyes swept across the ceiling's ostentatious colors, the floor tiles' greasy glare, and the red, yellow, and blue plastic chairs before finally stopping on one of the wall hangings. It read *Gorge thyself not on the finest rice and meat.*[11]

These bold words shocked Fei Du. The audacity of the bureau cafeteria seemed comparable to Luo Wenzhou's.

Anytime Luo Wenzhou didn't feel like cooking, he bought something simple from the cafeteria to bring home. Now, he approached the window

as he always did, then turned and asked Fei Du out of courtesy, “Any dietary restrictions?”

“Yes,” Fei Du replied discourteously. “No raw spring onions, cooked garlic, or ginger, raw or cooked. Also, nothing sour or spicy, and no lard, vegetable stems, tomato or eggplant skins, or meat from below an animal’s knees or above their neck. And no innards.”

Luo Wenzhou was rendered speechless.

Fei Du met his gaze squarely, then seemed to muse further. “Oh, right,” he added. “And I don’t eat boiled egg yolks or tofu made with magnesium chloride… Um, but I can manage tofu made with gypsum.”

Until that moment, Luo Wenzhou had never met a mammal harder to please than Luo Yiguo. By dint of great effort, he forced the words “Well, go eat shit, then” back down his throat. He took a deep breath, borrowed all the patience of his remaining years, and ordered through the window of the little cafeteria with instructions that the cook leave out this and that so that he could feed this damned Fei Yiguo.

In the end, Fei Du took a look at the table full of dishes, picked through everything, and only took a sweet bun with brown-sugar filling, along with some candy-apple chunks.

Luo Wenzhou’s eyelid twitched. “You didn’t say that you can’t eat seafood.”

“I can,” Fei Du replied, not even looking up. “I just don’t want to peel anything.”

Luo Wenzhou had no way to rebut this. Once again, he was gaining a new appreciation of Tao Ran’s saintly patience: The man had somehow

gone seven years without throttling this creature.

"You know what, Daddy's not going to stoop to the level of a brat like you. I asked you to stay for dinner out of pity." Luo Wenzhou angrily pulled out a pair of disposable gloves. *Think of it as feeding a cat,* he told himself as he peeled the braised shrimp and filled a platter with the flesh. "Tao Ran spoiled you. By the way, why did you stay and talk to He Zhongyi's mother for so long?"

Fei Du's chopsticks paused. Then he decided to take some shrimp after all, and in exchange, spoke without any implied insults. "No reason," he replied. "Anyway, you suspect the murderer is someone close to Zhang Donglai, don't you? And you're worried that they might be watching the police through him—so you let him out as bait?"

Luo Wenzhou wiped his hands. "You don't think it is?"

"Actually, I'm thinking along the same lines," Fei Du acknowledged. "If you'd started from the victim, it wouldn't have been hard to find them."

Luo Wenzhou's eyes widened.

"The murderer probably knew the victim," said Fei Du. "They may have changed their name entirely, but in a society where every person has an ID card, it's impossible to leave no trace of yourself. It's just that nobody's checked. Once you people look them up in the system, you'll reveal the killer quickly. That's why they're trying so hard to distract you."

Luo Wenzhou's voice turned grave. "You think that He Zhongyi knew the murderer before he came to Yancheng? He wasn't doing something shady for a stranger?"

“Mm-hmm,” Fei Du confirmed. “He sent that hundred thousand yuan over for his mom’s medical expenses less than a month after arriving in Yancheng. If I were going to do something illegal, I wouldn’t let anyone new and unfamiliar join me. A criminal organization making that kind of money would have tougher entry requirements than your bureau.”

Luo Wenzhou automatically ignored that last part. “Is it possible that He Zhongyi had a mysterious friend from his home province who knew that he needed money urgently and inducted him into a gang? Maybe the recruiter and murderer were different people.”

“According to his mother, He Zhongyi only mentioned the older man who helped him find his job—no one else. The man’s name is Zhao Yulong, and I think you guys already looked into him,” said Fei Du. “And if He Zhongyi was lucky enough to meet someone he already knew and trusted while he was away from home, wouldn’t he have mentioned that to his family?”

“If they were committing crimes together? Maybe he wouldn’t dare.”

“No.” Fei Du shook his head. “If they were committing crimes, he’d feel unsafe and subconsciously look for a sense of security. Telling his family ‘I’m with so-and-so’ would’ve been a way to derive comfort—to compensate for his nervousness. How come you’re so set on the existence of a superfluous gang, Sergeant Luo?”

Fei Du was too sharp. Luo Wenzhou put down his chopsticks and stared at the edge of his bowl for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “I can’t go into specifics, but on the night the victim died, he received a mysterious text message consisting of unclear instructions. It’s highly likely that he was killed in the Dongfumen District, but his body was dumped on the West

Side of Huashi, half an hour away by car. And, by some coincidence, we also just received a report about Huashi's West Side."

Fei Du was frowning, finally revealing a hint of surprise, when Luo Wenzhou's phone rang. The screen displayed an unknown number, but he picked up.

"Hello?"

There was static and the distant sound of heavy panting on the other end.

"Who is this?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

Just as he began to suspect that this was a prank call, an urgent cry burst from the speaker. "Help! Hel—"

Then it cut off.

The short, sharp plea had pierced through the silence of the cafeteria. Even Fei Du heard it. Luo Wenzhou tried to call back, but couldn't get through. Briefly as the caller had spoken, though, Luo Wenzhou had recognized the voice of the unlicensed taxi driver Chen Zhen.

Chen Zhen had reported Wang Hongliang on the basis of an overheard phone call involving Chen Yuan, plus other speculations that didn't seem to be based in solid fact. At the end of the day, he'd had no concrete evidence. Perhaps Chen Yuan had left nothing behind out of fear of inconveniencing her family, or perhaps Wang Hongliang had shut her up, then removed all the evidence while "searching for drugs." Regardless, the only thing Luo Wenzhou had received from Chen Zhen was his sister's old photo album.

When they parted, Luo Wenzhou had sensed the young man's overwhelming dissatisfaction. Afraid that he'd do something dangerous, Luo Wenzhou had made of a point of reminding him, "If there's no evidence, don't talk to anyone about this. Don't go looking on your own, either. If you think of anything, call me. Even if you risked your life and found evidence, we might not be able to use it—it might not be admissible in court." Luo Wenzhou had thought that he'd made things clear logically and emotionally—enough so to keep that kid in check. But, in just a day, something had happened.

He shoved the plate of peeled shrimp toward Fei Du. "Eat. Then remember to put the plate away. I need to take care of something—I'm heading off."

Fei Du took his time stabbing his straw into his box of lemon tea, then took a sip. It was sour and bitter—unfit for human consumption, really. Tossing the tea aside, he watched with a thoughtful gaze as Luo Wenzhou rushed off.

***

AFTER ZHANG TING had filled him in on everything that had happened with his detention and release, Zhang Donglai felt that his lawyer had played a vital role in his newfound freedom. After taking a bath with pomelo leaves for good luck, he asked the lawyer out for a one-on-one dinner.

Criminal lawyers dealt with higher risk and greater stress for lower pay than their colleagues providing legal services unrelated to litigation for uber-rich clients. It was rare that a client as silly and rich as Zhang Donglai was involved in such an uncomplicated case. If it hadn't been for his former schoolmate Zhao Haochang, this opportunity would probably never have fallen into the lawyer's lap. He accepted Zhang Donglai's invitation gladly.

After the dinner, just before they parted, Zhang Donglai tucked a thick red packet of money into the lawyer's hand. He'd meant to drop the man off at home, but as they walked out of the restaurant, Zhang Donglai had run into a model-esque beauty who greeted him very familiarly and jumped into his car as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The lawyer was self-aware enough to know that his very conspicuous presence was unwanted; he sat in the back seat and told Zhang Donglai that dropping him off at the closest subway station would be fine.

In the car, Zhang Donglai and his lovely companion bantered and flirted shamelessly. Their audience felt as if he were sitting on a carpet of needles; his thin skin wasn't built for this. Pretending to be nothing but a puff of air, he leaned back in his seat and played with his phone.

At an intersection, Zhang Donglai braked a little too abruptly. The lawyer pitched forward and, in the process, caught sight of something in the corner of his eye. He assumed at first that it was something that had fallen when they braked. He was going to pick it up, but when he bent down to do so, he froze. It was a silver-gray striped tie with the tag of some big brand on the end. The workmanship was good, but the tie appeared to have been viciously yanked at some point, enough to stretch it out. As lumpy as a dried fish, it sat caught in the cracks of the back seat.

Unbidden, the words of a detective at the station seemed to replay directly in the lawyer's ear: *"The victim was hit in the back of the head with a blunt object, but he died of asphyxiation. The murder weapon was some kind of flexible, cloth-like object, like a scarf, or a tie, or a soft rope…"*

A tie?!

Although the lawyer had had a bit to drink, the alcohol seemed to whoosh straight out of his pores and evaporate in a split second.

Just then, Zhang Donglai seemed to recall the existence of a living being in his back seat. His head turned as they started moving again. "How come you're doubled over, Mr. Liu? Too much to drink? Stomachache?"

The lawyer quickly straightened, all the blood in his body rushing straight to the crown of his head. His limbs were ice-cold, and his ears rang. He gathered all the energy left in him to force a smile. "I…I'm a little dizzy."

Zhang Donglai looked at him in the rearview mirror. Mr. Liu didn't know whether it was just a trick of the light, but he seemed to sense an inexplicable darkness emanating from Zhang Donglai's eyes. Fortunately, Zhang Donglai didn't seem to think too hard about the situation; after a few more glances, he quickly turned back to the beautiful lady beside him, wholly focused on their brazen flirting.

Staying stiffly in the same position, Mr. Liu opened his camera app and discreetly took a photo of the tie's location, then stretched out his foot and pulled the tie over with the toe of his shoe. He grabbed the tie through his sleeve and stowed it away in his briefcase, ensuring that the briefcase itself concealed his actions from the front.

His hand was still in the bag when Zhang Donglai unexpectedly glanced back at him again in the rearview mirror. “The stop right ahead, Mr. Liu?”

The lawyer’s heart almost stopped. He nodded jerkily, his power of speech somewhere far away.

Zhang Donglai raised an eyebrow. “Why are you all sweaty? Do I have the temperature set too high?”

“Don’t lower it any,” his female companion protested in the front seat. “I can’t handle the cold.”

Zhang Donglai turned back to her instantly, all smiles. “You’re cold? Even though you’re with me?”

The girl punched him coyly. She and Zhang Donglai soon turned into a mess of tangled limbs.

If it not for the distraction provided by the completely oblivious girl in front, Mr. Liu would probably have lost his wits altogether. He didn’t know how he got out of the car. Even then, it wasn’t over; Zhang Donglai popped his head out the window to inquire, disingenuously polite, “Are you okay, Mr. Liu? Did you drink too much? You really don’t need a ride home?”

The lawyer worked hard to move his facial muscles. “I really don’t.”

Fortunately, Zhang Donglai was blinded by lust. He’d only asked out of courtesy, not because he actually wanted to give the lawyer a ride. Having confirmed that the lawyer had refused him, he stepped on the gas and disappeared. Only as the night breeze blew over him did Mr. Liu realize that his spine was completely soaked in sweat.

Chapter 13

LUO WENZHOU HAD CHEN ZHEN'S number, but he didn't recognize the number that had called him earlier. He dialed Deputy Lu as he sped toward Huashi in his car.

"Uncle Lu, it's me. It's an emergency. Could you find someone to help me locate two phone numbers? I don't have time to apply for approval."

Deputy Lu didn't miss a beat. "What numbers and where are you now?" Luo Wenzhou quickly gave him Chen Zhen's number and the unknown number from the earlier call. Deputy Lu took them down swiftly, then asked, "What's the situation? Can you guarantee your own safety?"

"Safety's my middle name," Luo Wenzhou said. He turned the steering wheel hard and merged onto the bridge from Nanping Boulevard, shifting lanes to head straight to the West Side.

At night, Yancheng grew warm and stuffy without warning, the summer's heat insistent. Occasionally, birds screeched precariously through the sea of cars, flying so low that they almost scraped the road—omens of a storm on the horizon. Rush hour traffic tended to last longer on Friday nights, the central business district warming up for the weekend as the enormous Sky Screen spread its eye-catching LED canvas. The nighttime lights that chased relentlessly after passersby pierced the wide road, entering Luo Wenzhou's car. The visual assault abated only when he was well into the maze of the West Side's streets.

Deputy Lu was efficient and reliable, and before long, Luo Wenzhou received a call from a technician: Chen Zhen's phone had been located near the West Side's Scenic Street West, and the unknown number was very close to the device. Moreover, the latter number was registered under the owner's real name: It belonged to a woman named Wu Xuechun.

"Wu Xuechun?" Luo Wenzhou was taken aback. "A real person with a real name?"

"Yes, that's the name," the technician confirmed. "I'll send her ID info to your phone shortly."

The GPS told Luo Wenzhou that he was near Scenic Street West. He decelerated.

The reason Luo Wenzhou was bold enough to rush here on his own was because he was certain Wang Hongliang wouldn't dare to touch him. Snakes like Wang Hongliang were accustomed to flattering superiors and bullying subordinates; they sorted people into a clear pecking order. To Wang Hongliang, some people were just ants—they weren't worth mentioning, and he didn't care if he had to crush them dead. But there were others he was forced to lick the boots of, holding his nose, however much he loathed them. Luo Wenzhou wasn't anyone important, but his father had yet to retire.

If Chen Zhen had met with danger while calling Luo Wenzhou for help, then Wang Hongliang was already aware of his existence. The phone number Chen Zhen had called from was registered and easy to trace, so Wang Hongliang should have realized instantly that Luo Wenzhou's arrival was only a matter of time. It made sense to think that Wang Hongliang

would contact him first and probe, seeking some private way to resolve the matter…

But so far, he hadn't done so.

It was very possible, Luo Wenzhou realized immediately, that Wang Hongliang was in the dark about whatever had happened tonight. His underlings might've acted of their own accord. This was very dangerous, but also an opportunity.

Luo Wenzhou's phone dinged as Wu Xuechun's details arrived, and Luo Wenzhou pulled over at the corner of Scenic Street West.

Scenic Street West was a pedestrian area of open-air barbecues, night markets, and so-called "spas" and "massage parlors." It was pedestrianized not by law, but by the impossibility of using any mode of motorized transport besides narrow three-wheel carts, given the unauthorized stalls and street vendors packing the road. The air was thick with the smoke of grilled meat. A shirtless man nearby was stir-frying river snails in an iron wok, his spatula scraping the metal noisily. Specialized "service staff" wearing thick makeup stood at the corner of the street, happy to enjoy barbecue skewers while they waited for business. The stench of the sewers below the street occasionally wafted up, and not too far away, a few people were openly scooping up and reusing gutter oil.

Luo Wenzhou swept his eyes over everything. He stood in place, musing, before walking over to a cluster of unlicensed taxis. By this point in the night, the drivers had all let themselves off work, and everyone had congregated for some gambling. A middle-aged man with amazing luck swore happily as he threw his cards on a car hood. "Fuck! How's that?!" he

demanded, exposing his uneven, yellow teeth in an ear-to-ear grin. “Happy now? Cough up!”

He reached out to his companion for a cigarette. Before his friend could pass one over, though, another hand emerged from behind to give him one and even lit it for him. All the drivers turned to look at the pleasant sight of broad-shouldered, long-legged Sergeant Luo.

“Hey, bud. Let me ask you something.” Smiling politely, Luo Wenzhou distributed cigarettes all around. “My car’s license plate was restricted yesterday, so I took one of your colleagues’ cars. But I accidentally left a newly signed contract in there. It’s just a few sheets of paper, worthless to anyone else—still, I’ll have to kill myself if I don’t find it. You won’t be helping me for free, either—I’ll properly thank anyone who helps.”

Luo Wenzhou was as good as his word. As soon as he finished speaking, rather than following up with questions, he opened his wallet and began handing a red hundred-yuan note to each driver.

“Could you help spread the word?” he asked them. “I swear I’ll pay for info.”

Luo Wenzhou was an expert at deception. All he gave this crew a detailed description of was the car’s model and shape; he stumbled over the license plate, since it would’ve been abnormal for a regular person to memorize one. After a long, contemplative moment, he gave them the first two letters and the last number in an uncertain tone, then sketched out the driver’s appearance with gestures. The drivers had their own cliques and territories, however, so this information was all they needed to reach a hypothesis: “Was your driver that kid? Chen Zhen?”

That cued Luo Wenzhou to shut his mouth. He let his gaze go glassy as it drifted between the drivers, successfully creating a false impression of confusion. Drawn by the siren call of reward money, the drivers gave up their card game and slunk smoothly into the vast network of narrow alleys.

Luo Wenzhou lit himself a cigarette. Before he finished it, he'd received the news he sought: Someone had apparently spotted Chen Zhen's car parked by the road. They gave him the exact location, plus Chen Zhen's number. Of course, Luo Wenzhou couldn't get through to Chen Zhen for the moment, so he offered his informant cash and asked him to lead him to the car.

Chen Zhen's vehicle was in an open-air parking lot outside Scenic Street West; it contained painted lines demarcating parking spaces, but no attendants. The secondhand sedan sat next to the road all by itself. People passed by it, but its owner was nowhere to be found. Moreover, the parking lot's only security camera was broken—it was half shattered, probably by some young street urchin, and the remains were cold and dead.

The man who'd given Luo Wenzhou the clue probably felt guilty over having earned his money a little too easily; he bravely volunteered to ask around about Chen Zhen's whereabouts. After he left, Luo Wenzhou circled the car alone for a moment and discovered cigarette butts littering the ground outside the driver's-side door. Someone standing there had stepped on those cigarette butts, leaving a messy shoeprint, as if anxious.

Luo Wenzhou paused at that shoeprint. He looked around, putting his back against the car door. The fact that Chen Zhen had ignored his warning and acted alone probably meant that the young man had been in a state of

great agitation. So what did it mean that he'd just stood there alone for long enough to smoke several cigarettes?

Had he suddenly had second thoughts about what he was doing? Or had he been waiting for someone…?

The man who'd accepted his money jogged back over to him. "I think you should just leave a note on his car, so that he can contact you himself when he's back," he told Luo Wenzhou quietly. "I asked the lady at the clothes shop, and she said she saw that kid standing here for ages, acting all shifty. Then he went to the Grand Luck."

"The Grand Luck?"

"That place!" The man pointed at a building directly across from Chen Zhen's car. It was an entertainment center with dazzling lights and a large sign above the entrance that read BILLIARDS, CARD/BOARD GAMES, MASSAGE, KARAOKE. A whole row of cars had parked outside.

Luo Wenzhou surreptitiously texted *Grand Luck, east end of Scenic Street, Huashi West Side: req backup* to Deputy Lu as he dismissed his companion with a few words. He walked around the Grand Luck, taking stock of its surroundings, then ran a hand through his hair and sauntered in.

The lobby had thick marble floors. The European-style chandeliers overhead had a few blown bulbs but nevertheless cast a dim glow over the place. A handful of idle young men were hanging around in the lobby; they looked like riffraff, smoking and glancing around. When they noticed Luo Wenzhou, they gave him a covert once-over.

Luo Wenzhou pretended not to see them at all. He went straight to the counter and rapped on it. "One room, please. My friends will join me soon."

Next, he casually picked up the drinks menu next to him, and scanned the list. The beverages cost at least 50 percent more than their market price, but he ordered a ton of them with seeming indifference. Astounded that such a stupid-but-wealthy client had fallen into their laps, the receptionist rushed to key in his order. “Could you repeat that slower, sir…?”

But Luo Wenzhou suddenly stopped altogether.

The receptionist looked up in confusion. Her “customer” was staring fixedly at her, his gaze suggestive and meaningful. He lowered his voice and asked, “What’s the least a customer has to spend to choose their… *server*?”

The receptionist paused, then gave him a knowing smile. She drew a photo album from under the table and carefully handed it to him, lowering her voice as well. “Why not have a look at the photos first?”

The album’s “artistic portraits” weren’t at all artistic. Each face was so overdone that it looked like a snake demon’s, their aesthetic overwhelmingly vulgar and uncultured. Luo Wenzhou flipped through the whole thing twice before affecting an air of slight annoyance. “These photos are so edited that their own mothers wouldn’t recognize them. Anything more normal?” Just as the receptionist was about to respond, Luo Wenzhou leaned forward as if too impatient to keep up the act any longer. “I’ll be specific. Do you have someone here called Wu Xuechun?”

“Wu…Wu Xuechun?” The receptionist’s smile stiffened.

Luo Wenzhou’s sharp gaze cracked through his suggestive veneer. “What?” he asked, his voice low.

The receptionist looked away instinctively, as if his gaze had given her a shock. She forced a calm facade and smiled at Luo Wenzhou, sugary

sweet. “You see, sir, our servers typically use English names. When you said her real name, it took me a moment to process. Wu Xuechun… That’s ‘Linda,’ right?”

Even in the mouth of the lion’s den, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t resist being cheeky. “English names? Your business is very on trend.”

The receptionist’s eyes flashed, and she pushed the album back into Luo Wenzhou’s hands. “Linda isn’t well today, sir. Could you maybe pick someone else? Or do you know her from somewhere?”

Luo Wenzhou lifted his chin, not answering, then peered down his nose at the girl. “Why?” he asked coldly in return. “Do I need a background check just to ask for a specific server?”

The receptionist quickly murmured an apology and assigned him a room. As she told someone to show him there, he sensed several more sets of eyes trained upon his back.

Once he was finally gone, the receptionist sighed and picked up a commercial walkie-talkie that she’d had off to one side. “The guy you were talking about is here,” she said in an undertone. “He went to the Hibiscus City room.”

A wave of static came down the line, followed by a male voice. “How many are in his group?”

“J-just one.” The receptionist pursed her lips. Her palm was so clammy the walkie-talkie nearly slipped from her hand. “Next time, could you pl-please ask someone else to do this? I—”

Before she could finish, a stream of curses burst forth. “Motherfucker! One guy?! Does he want to die? Damn, I should’ve known

that we could just have waited at the door for him—carried him off in a burlap sack and killed him just like that. What a waste of our damn time!"

Suddenly, the griping cut off, and a girl in a white dress was half pushed, half dragged into the lobby. The name tag on her chest read *Linda*. It was Wu Xuechun.

As she walked past the counter, she glanced helplessly at the receptionist. Their eyes met for a moment, then quickly parted again.

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MERE MINUTES AFTER Luo Wenzhou left, Fei Du decided that he couldn't be bothered to continue eating. He walked out of the bureau cafeteria and instantly spotted He Zhongyi's mother, who had woken up; an officer on duty was striving to convince her to stay in the hostel. Her eyes bulged, her face waxy yellow, and she was twisting her shirt hem, neither making a noise nor nodding. Not knowing anything about the world outside her village, she always suspected others of trying to scam her and felt perpetually helpless.

People who lived for years in a relatively isolated environment not interacting with the outside world often seemed timid and stupid because of their ignorance and inexperience. This woman had been largely bedridden for ages, only able to rely on her son. He'd been her only protection in this ever-changing world, her only connection to it.

Fei Du studied her through the glass for a moment. She looked like a snail that had lost its shell. He left the bureau without making himself

known to her, hurrying alone to Huashi's West Side.

***

"HIBISCUS CITY" was a corner room. It was brighter than the other rooms, and Luo Wenzhou felt uneasy the instant he walked in. He swept a look over the entire chamber and observed something peculiar about the corner of it.

Walking around the Grand Luck earlier, Luo Wenzhou had noticed that some of the corner windows were unsealed due to construction flaws. This room appeared to have one of those windows. That window wasn't open, and blackout blinds were pasted across the wallpaper to block it off from the inside. But years had passed and the blinds were peeling. Through the cracks, light from the street outside shone in. Luo Wenzhou glanced out, his manner casual, then quickly withdrew his gaze. He turned the music on and looked up at the ceiling as if searching for a smoke alarm; not seeing one, he pulled out a cigarette and began to light up.

As he held his lighter in one hand, cupping the flame naturally in the other, he used the motion to secretly unfold a piece of paper in his palm. When the receptionist gave Luo Wenzhou the album for the second time, she'd used it to conceal her actions as she surreptitiously shoved that paper into his hand. On the paper, written hastily in ballpoint pen, were the words *People are waiting to trap you*.

Luo Wenzhou glanced over the paper, surprised. Of course he realized there were people biding their time to ambush him—once Chen

Zhen called him, they must've expected him to come. That was why he'd said the name "Wu Xuechun" at the door and rushed straight in ostentatiously—he'd come off as practiced yet unwise. He wanted to seem both well-prepared and completely clueless. That way, he wouldn't scare off the mastermind; they'd think that they had the winning cards. They might even go off script and play cat and mouse with him. He had been planning to use himself as bait for the enemy and then turn the tables on them.

He'd never expected that a receptionist he didn't even know would be covertly trying to help him. Putting him in the "Hibiscus City" room, with its overlooked unsealed window, had likely been part of her plan—if something happened, this was a place he could escape from.

Luo Wenzhou stroked his chin, wholeheartedly amazed. *There really are benefits to being handsome,* he thought.

At that point, someone pushed open the door from the outside. Luo Wenzhou put down the lighter soundlessly, crushing the paper in his hand as he looked up. A girl in a white dress stood in the door. Her dyed hair looked rather dull, and her makeup was unusually thick.

She pulled her mouth into a smile. "Hello, sir. I'm Linda," she said in a cutesy voice. She looked as if she'd erased her eyes and nose and then drawn new features on with makeup. Not even a detective with a wealth of experience could have said whether she was the real Wu Xuechun.

A few servers followed her into the room, setting down all of Luo Wenzhou's drinks. Luo Wenzhou thought for a moment, then nodded at the girl. "Sit."

Linda was an industrious, proactive server; she didn't give herself a second's rest upon entering the room. As she arranged the drinks on the table, she struck up conversation with Luo Wenzhou, and she perceptively held up the ashtray for him as he was thinking of tapping his ash in it. "You must have a lot of friends coming for all these drinks, huh, handsome? Need me to call a few girlfriends in?"

Her voice was cloying and affected, but also had an involuntary nasal tone. Close up, he could see her bloodshot eyes. She must have just cried; her thick makeup was meant to hide the flushed skin around her eyes and nose.

Luo Wenzhou paused. He lifted her chin gently and studied her face, pairing this apparently lecherous move with a severe expression, as if trying to spot any similarity between her and the photo that had been on her ID. After a long moment, seeming to glean something from her face, he started to draw his hand away.

As he began to speak, Linda suddenly seized his wrist. Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes slightly. Before he could pull away, though, the girl made a plausible show of rejecting him. "No, handsome—drinking only," she whined. "It's that time of the month for me."

As she spoke, she sagged backward and happened to bump a bottle on the table. The bottle wobbled, about to tumble, and a look of alarm flashed across the girl's heavily painted face. Luo Wenzhou immediately reached over her, however, and grabbed the bottle. Not a single drop spilled.

Linda froze. Luo Wenzhou sighed inwardly. He'd guessed that the room was bugged, of course, under either the table or the sofa. Now he

could tell that the bug was probably under the table. The girl's plan to fake an accident and spill alcohol on it to damage it was far too obvious.

Glancing at Linda, he said meaningfully, "A girl like you should be more careful."

Linda had assumed that he hadn't picked up on her intention, and a panicked expression crossed her vulgarly made-up face. However, Luo Wenzhou simply replaced the bottle, calm and casual.

"How long have you worked here?" he asked. "Got a boyfriend?"

Linda gazed at him blankly. "Over a year, and no," she replied without thinking.

Luo Wenzhou stared into her eyes. "And you're not looking?"

She shook her head.

"Eventually, you'll have to." Luo Wenzhou smiled, gently tapping the edge of the table with his finger. In a quieter voice, he asked, "Any boys you're close with?"

His long, slender hands were particularly eye-catching as his finger gently, rhythmically tapped the table. Naturally, they drew Linda's gaze. She noticed that his finger wasn't striking one spot, but moving around…in the shape of the name "Chen"!

So he knew that the room was bugged, and that they were being surveilled!

Linda's—or rather, Wu Xuechun's—vision blurred under a layer of moisture. Suppressing her feelings with difficulty, she deliberated, then said, "There…is one. My old neighbor. He once helped me when I was

being harassed after work, and he's always looked out for me… But what's the point of thinking about him? I'm part of this now. He must hate me."

"Hate you?"

Wu Xuechun hadn't said that her neighbor found her disgusting or objectionable. She'd said "hate," hinting at her relationship with Chen Zhen. She'd also emphasized that she was part of "this"—which meant that she knew something about the goings-on in this place, and may even have been involved in Chen Yuan's death.

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, then asked softly, "Is that boy still *in town*?"

Wu Xuechun nodded. "Yeah. I'm too ashamed to see him, but he's doing all right, so I'm happy."

Luo Wenzhou breathed a sigh of relief. Wu Xuechun meant that Chen Zhen was alive—just temporarily imprisoned. This girl was even sharper than he'd expected.

He slowly leaned back against the sofa. "What does he do?"

Wu Xuechun saw plenty of guests every day; when it came to body language, she was observant. Seeing Luo Wenzhou relax slightly, she understood that he'd heard her message and was now seemingly asking her why Chen Zhen had come to the Grand Luck. Resisting the urge to look at the camera, she thought about what to say, then murmured, "I don't know. Some job… Oh, but I heard that a kid in his family ran away a few days ago, and that they're looking everywhere. That kid used to come here after school—she even had a dodgy boyfriend. My old neighbor came over to ask me about that a few days back."

“A missing kid,” Luo Wenzhou said, drawing out each syllable. “Why not report that to the police?”

At the word “police,” Wu Xuechun stiffened. “No point,” she muttered. “No one cares.” After a moment, she added, as if she’d thought of it suddenly, “A place name was written in the kid’s workbook. It’s close to here. He doesn’t live in the area, so he came to ask me about it.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned. So Chen Zhen had come to ask about the Golden Triangle lot!

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THE CAMERA AND BUG transmitted Luo Wenzhou and Linda’s “idle chitchat” loud and clear.

On the second floor of the Grand Luck, a luxury room was thick with the smell of alcohol and another, somewhat odd scent. Inside that room, men and women—high and clearly delirious—had struck up a frenzied, demonic dance. Meanwhile, a few sober men sat on a ring of sofas, monitoring Luo Wenzhou through a screen and earpieces. Their leader was Huang Jinglian, the head of the Huashi District Bureau criminal investigation team. Those men never touched the drugs. Even now, they were only drinking a little, ignoring the nest of devils behind them.

One man pointed at the screen and remarked to Huang Jinglian, “It’s been almost twenty minutes. Why’s this Luo guy still yammering on and on?”

“Can’t you tell? He’s trying to find out what happened to the boy,” Huang Jinglian replied placidly. “Now that he knows that the boy isn’t dead, he won’t do anything rash.”

“How do you know, Sergeant Huang?”

“I figure the kid didn’t tell him anything.” Sergeant Huang crossed his ankle over his knee, resembling a confident general. “If Luo knew what was going on here, he wouldn’t have charged in alone so rashly… Anyway, that girl’s quite a turncoat. We need to think about how to get rid of her after this.”

“How will we take care of Luo, though? Should we report this to Director Wang tomorrow?”

“Director Wang? He’s an old man. He’s gone soft. Tell him today, and he won’t even wait until tomorrow to go to that kid’s house with cash and beg him to let it slide. And even if Luo did behave himself and fall in with us, we’d have to give him a big cut later. It’d never end. We should just take care of this now.” Huang Jinglian chuckled darkly. “But not at this exact second. Considering what just happened on the West Side, things are too sensitive right now. We’ll have to be stealthier about it.”

“You mean…”

“Keep that Chen boy for now. When this blows over, we’ll use the kid to lure Luo Wenzhou out.” Huang Jinglian licked his lips. “And if, on the way, he just happens to run into a criminal he once caught… Well, our line of work comes with a degree of risk to begin with. Of course, that plan depends on Chen Zhen following orders. Did you give him the injection?”

A man next to him stood up instantly. “Yeah, we did. I’ll go check on

him."

Looking up, Huang Jinglian dodged some stoned girl's senseless clinging with a look of distaste. *So this is the professional standard of the city bureau's so-called "elite,"* he thought triumphantly. *He exposed himself the second he walked in, before even starting to investigate—and all under our watch.* It seemed that every industry was the same: Getting to the top was only a matter of who your father was.

Huang Jinglian sipped his drink with a sinister look on his face. An inexplicable bitterness rose up inside him as he watched Luo Wenzhou speak in code with the hooker.

Just then, the man who'd left earlier rushed back in, panicking. "S-S-Sergeant Huang, he…h-he…"

Huang Jinglian looked up impatiently and saw that his subordinate's face was completely drained of blood; he seemed thunderstruck.

"He's d-dead!" the man stammered.

Huang Jinglian furrowed his brow. "Speak more clearly, you fucking moron. I can barely understand you. Who's dead?"

"Th…that guy…" Tongue-tied, the man pointed to where Chen Zhen had been locked away.

All at once, Huang Jinglian understood, and he seemed to feel his head explode. Rising from the sofa so quickly that the air whooshed past him, he threw his glass into his subordinate's face. "Dead?! Who let you touch him?!" he bellowed.

"N-nobody touched him," the man sobbed. "We did like you said—we gave him that injection. Just a small dose. *Small*, Sergeant Huang! If

you'd given that to any of these guys, they wouldn't even have felt it! How could he have died from that?! It's almost like a fucking trick!"

It was possible to die of an overdose when doing drugs for the first time, but the lethal dose varied from person to person. Some people could die of an allergic reaction from a single peanut, or one sip of milk, so of course there were people who could die from a small amount of a recreational drug. Still, they were such an extreme minority that nobody would've predicted hale, hearty Chen Zhen of being vulnerable in that respect.

Buzzing filled Huang Jinglian's brain. He whipped around and glared at the screen—at Luo Wenzhou. Almost as if to himself, he said, "This has gotten out of hand now. We need to keep him here."

Chapter 14

WHEN THE SOBER PEOPLE in the room heard thatalarming statement, they all turned to stare at HuangJinglian, their eyes wide and their mouths agape.

Huang Jinglian paced a few restless laps around the room, with his head down.

“But he’s from the municipal bureau,” someone said quietly.

Although everyone in the room was breaking the law for their own benefit and sweeping crime under the rug, few had been active participants in anything serious. All they had to do was turn a blind eye and await their hush money. They still went to work as usual and got paid as usual. This was, at worst, a kind of gray-area income consisting of social engagements that they needed to attend at “entertainment” facilities. None of them thought of themselves as true criminals. And, while the influence of Wang Hongliang’s immorality meant that they all agreed that it was fine if a few hookers or petty criminals died here or there, laying a hand on a colleague would be crossing the line.

A person’s eyes sat under their forehead, and they typically saw those on their level and above them as people like themselves. If their stature meant that they looked down at someone else, however, they often saw that other party as lesser—as an animal. That category tended to include powerless, helpless, or struggling people, often those who were old, sick, weak, or disabled. Humans could accept that animals felt warmth, coldness, and hunger, but nothing beyond that. So what did it matter if an animal

died? When people talked about the sanctity of life, after all, they normally meant *human* life; the heavens weren't concerned about other life forms.

Thus, while Chen Zhen dying would only constitute an unfortunate accident, Luo Wenzhou dying would be a big deal—at least, that was what most of the people present thought. Among them, Huang Jinglian was the only one with the innate audacity to differ. Perhaps he truly was someone after all.

"Sergeant Huang, you can't," someone said timidly. "You really can't. Anyway, I think it's fine if what's-his-name died. Let's just get rid of the body. If Luo Wenzhou doesn't find him alive or dead, he won't have any evidence, and he won't get a warrant. What could he do at that point?"

"What could he do? He knows that Chen Zhen went missing here." Huang Jinglian ground his teeth harshly, feeling as though he was squeezing each word out from between his teeth. "Luo Wenzhou might return empty-handed today, but what about tomorrow? The day after that? Do you plan not to do shit all day—just wait here around the clock for him? And can you guarantee that everyone here will keep their mouths shut? Business is business, but a human life has been lost now. And never mind him—if you told Director Wang what happened today, he might not even *want* to save you!"

"But…but Luo Wenzhou is one of us…" the person he'd spoken to stammered.

"That's exactly why we should be leery! Why would a corpse randomly appear *there* on the evening of the twentieth? You were all there, right? Who saw it? Don't tell me it was a coincidence. Why would anyone dump a body someplace so cursed? It's like…it's like they were targeting us

specifically!" As Huang Jinglian wove his conspiracy theory, his own words sent a chill down his spine. "Also, about that Chen Zhen guy popping up out of nowhere and asking about *that place*—do any of you want to tell me how he found out? If that hadn't been caught on audio, or I hadn't happened to be here, the handcuffs in your pockets right now might be wrapped around your own wrists! How and when did a little brat driving an unlicensed taxi get in touch with the criminal investigation team at the municipal bureau? Huh? Do you guys know? None of you do—because none of you know shit!"

At some point, someone had turned off the music. Those who were high were still high, but those who were sober were dead silent.

"What happened today must be related to the May twentieth case, and there must be a traitor among us," Huang Jinglian said slowly, pausing after each word. "My original plan was to catch this Chen guy, give him a little *perk*, and then try to get some info from him…but whatever. Now that it's come to this, and we need to do things the messy way, just tell me: Do you guys have the balls for it?"

Not a single person responded.

Huang Jinglian sighed heavily. "All right. You're all useless. Do whatever you want. Go turn yourselves in now. Go ahead—maybe you can get a lighter sentence."

At that point, somebody spoke up—the man Huang Jinglian had thrown his drink at. "I'm the one who gave him the injection." As Huang Jinglian turned, side-eyeing him, he continued, "I-I killed him. I have no other choice… I'm on board!"

"You gave him the injection, but who else was touching him at the time? Who hid to one side and knocked him out when he panicked and ran?" One corner of Huang Jinglian's mouth quirked up in a sneer as he surveyed the group. "Who tied him up? Who kept watch on the door? Oh, speaking of keeping watch, I need to ask: Xiao-Song said that he only gave the guy a light dose, so how is it that he died? Hm?"

One by one, the others looked down, falling silent again.

"If you don't think you had anything to do with this, you can leave." Huang Jinglian gave them all a sinister smile, then tapped the corner of his mouth. "But once you do, you better watch your mouth."

Everyone had a mouth, and anyone with a mouth who walked out those doors was a potential rat. Not that anyone would admit they were a rat in front of somebody as cruel and merciless as Huang Jinglian. They remained silent.

"When you do it, be careful," added Huang Jinglian, expressionless. "Remember—Sergeant Luo ran into a crazed addict while investigating the May twentieth murder case on the West Side, and he tragically lost his life."

***

LUO WENZHOU GLANCED at his watch. At this point, it had been over twenty minutes since he'd called for backup. Not even the thick soundproof walls could block out the music from next door, which was loud enough to demolish something.

Currently, Luo Wenzhou was sitting face-to-face with a young woman who held a disreputable job, in front of him a pile of booze that cost half his monthly salary.

An eerie little breeze brushed over his neck; he wondered if they'd set the room's AC too low. Then a sudden premonition crept up on Luo Wenzhou. He picked up the large, heavy ashtray on the table and pretended to examine it. "You know, you don't look that old," he told Wu Xuechun. "You could do anything else. Ever think of changing careers?"

Wu Xuechun shook her head. She didn't say anything; instead, she rolled up her dress's long sleeves. Her thin, delicate arms were marred by a few needle marks, as well as bruises from improper injections. She was very pale, so the marks stood out, the shocking effects of an unbreakable habit.

Luo Wenzhou froze for a moment. In a situation like this, he should probably have offered her a few words of comfort and encouragement, like a kind older brother. That was likely what etiquette called for. But some people's circumstances were just extraordinarily cruel. In her shoes, he didn't think he could've made any better decisions. Offering platitudes would be like telling a terminally ill patient to drink more water: useless, hypocritical, and condescending.

With nothing to say, he shut up.

At that moment, the demolition-level heavy metal next door fell silent between two songs. Luo Wenzhou's ears recovered a bit, and he heard a series of rushed footsteps outside. Before he could think, his subconscious reacted, and he blurted to Wu Xuechun, "Where's Chen Zhen?"

His sudden question startled Wu Xuechun, who answered instinctively. “In the storage room on the west side of the second floor.”

The moment she finished speaking, Luo Wenzhou used one hand to drag her to her feet. He pushed her roughly toward the window. “Run.”

Wu Xuechun backed up a few steps, tripped on her high heels, and twisted her ankle. Still dazed, she braced herself hesitantly against the wall and tried to regain her balance. “I…” She wanted to say, *“I’m fine—I’m with them, so they won’t do anything to me*.”

Luo Wenzhou, however, interrupted firmly before she could start that long-winded sentence. “Cut the crap. Just do as I say. And take off your shoes.”

The word “shoes” had barely left his mouth when someone kicked the door open. A group of flashy youths charged in, shrouded in a thick cloud of alcohol and another specific odor. They attacked immediately without saying a single word.

Luo Wenzhou grabbed the fancy ashtray from the table and, spotting a dangerous glint out of the corner of his eye, quickly used it to shield himself. Metal clanked against glass as a large watermelon knife scraped across the bottom of the ashtray.

Slamming the ashtray down onto the attacker’s wrist, Luo Wenzhou twisted the guy’s arm behind him, then kneed him in the stomach. The blow almost forced the bile from the attacker’s gut. He lost his grip on the knife, which Luo Wenzhou snatched from him with ease.

Grabbing the attacker’s bleached-blond hair, Luo Wenzhou bashed the guy’s head into the wall, then immediately ducked to avoid someone else’s attack. He picked up a smooth, disk-shaped bottle of questionably

authentic Rémy Martin and swung it at this second assailant's forehead like a large frying pan.

These attackers were all petty criminals whose ghoulish looks betrayed their substance abuse; Luo Wenzhou, on the other hand, was young and fit, exercised regularly, had plenty of experience with street brawls, and asked for an extra egg in his jianbing every day. Given the extreme discrepancy between their skills, Luo Wenzhou was able to dispatch the pack of addicts very quickly.

He glanced back and saw that Wu Xuechun had listened to him after he'd yelled at her: She'd removed her shoes and escaped through the window. Taking a deep breath, he rushed to the storage room on the second floor.

Why had they suddenly attacked him after leaving him alone for so long? Luo Wenzhou had no time to puzzle it out. As he sprinted up to the second floor in just a few bounds, a deep unease settled over his heart, and an irrational thought suddenly flashed across his mind: Had something happened to Chen Zhen?

The petty criminals he'd beaten up had summoned some friends who chased after him menacingly. A waiter let out a startled yell, pressing himself into a wall, as Luo Wenzhou pushed past him and spotted the storage room: a door with a mottled EMPLOYEES ONLY sign. He took half a step back, then aimed a flying kick at the door. The reverberation from the impact hurt his calf, so he switched legs for the next heavy kick. When that one landed, his lower leg went straight through the door—he'd put a hole in it.

Luo Wenzhou forced the door open violently and saw someone lying inside, unmoving. “Chen Zhen!”

He wanted to step forward and take a closer look, but his legs were numb from kicking open the door, and they stopped him momentarily. That brief pause was enough for his brain, overheated from fighting, to start to cool as his breathing gradually returned to normal. Suddenly, he realized something was wrong.

He’d managed to get Chen Zhen’s location from Wu Xuechun without much effort, but when he did, someone must’ve been watching through the camera. So why hadn’t they moved Chen Zhen?

As soon as he wondered that, Luo Wenzhou backed up. In the same instant, the person on the floor leaped up without warning, aiming a knife straight at his neck. Fully alert, Luo Wenzhou whipped the stolen watermelon knife up in front of himself protectively, knocking his attacker’s wrist away. Then he grabbed the attacker’s shoulder and swung him to the side, smashing him against a shelf.

His attacker also seemed to have a good amount of experience. The man curled in on himself a bit to lessen the impact, then used that momentum to attack again. His fist struck Luo Wenzhou under the ribs and knocked the breath out of him. Luo Wenzhou nearly let go of his knife and barely managed to avoid the other man’s grasp. He yanked the man’s arm and spun him around, then stomped down on the joint of his knee.

With a shrill scream, the man fell to his knees. In the dim light coming in from the doorway, Luo Wenzhou took a good look at the man in his hands. He didn’t know who he was, but he’d seen the man hanging

around Wang Hongliang, at his beck and call. Luo Wenzhou yanked his hair to force his head up and demanded, “Where is Chen Zhen?”

The person he’d brought to his knees was, in fact, Huang Jinglian. He now glared up at Luo Wenzhou, showing no sign of remorse. Instead, he smiled slightly. “Waiting for you up ahead.”

Luo Wenzhou immediately understood what the man meant. His pupils constricted, and suddenly, he sensed something moving behind him. Twisting instinctively, he raised his arms to shield his face. There was a sharp crack as a bottle of alcohol and Luo Wenzhou’s left arm both met unfortunate fates.

Behind Luo Wenzhou, a whole group of people charged in. It was an ambush. They all rushed him, some holding blades, some bottles, some bats, and some wielding metal bike locks. Luo Wenzhou tried to evade them, but they overwhelmed him, and he was soon in dire straits.

He did actually have a gun with him—he’d applied to bring one right before he left—but he didn’t dare take it out unless he really had no other choice. After all, he had no idea whether Wang Hongliang’s lackeys would follow the Five Prohibitions.[12] Right now, his attackers were under the impression that he was helpless and unprepared, and could be dealt with easily using weapons other than firearms. They also didn’t want to cause a huge scene in the busy city, which was why they were indulging him by engaging in hand-to-hand combat—Luo Wenzhou didn’t have backup, so hand-to-hand was a much simpler choice than a gun. Besides, the Grand Luck was right in the middle of the city, and if they hurt an innocent citizen in the chaos, it could blow up into a huge problem.

Abruptly, the sharp sound of a police siren rang out. Everyone else in the room froze; only Luo Wenzhou reacted lightning fast, grabbing the face of one of the men in his way and aiming an uppercut right at the cartilage of his nose. Then, dodging a blade and a kick, he escaped out into the hallway.

Luo Wenzhou knew that the siren was fake. The West Side's roads were tricky to navigate, and it hadn't even been half an hour since he called for backup; they couldn't have arrived so fast. In case there was a trap, he chose not to take the stairs and instead ran to a corner bathroom. Inside, he yanked open the second-floor window and jumped down.

By this point, Luo Wenzhou had taken a slash to his back and couldn't really raise his left arm. He wasn't sure whether it was broken. There were also countless cuts, scrapes, and bruises all over him, in all shapes and sizes. Two hours ago, he'd been in the cafeteria, languidly feeding a "cat" and concocting a plan to lure in the culprit of the May 20 murder case with Zhang Donglai-shaped bait. Somehow, between then and now, he'd landed himself in an action movie.

Life was as unpredictable as Luo Yiguo's mood.

"Dage, over here!" a voice suddenly called out from behind him. Luo Wenzhou looked back and saw a barefoot Wu Xuechun wave at him desperately.

"Didn't I tell you to run?" Luo Wenzhou exploded. "Why're you still here?!"

"I was the one who sounded that alarm," said Wu Xuechun. "You aren't familiar with this area. I'll lead you out. Did you find Chen Zhen?"

Luo Wenzhou's pursuers caught up to him before he could respond.

“Right there! Get him!”

Luo Wenzhou could only grab Wu Xuechun and flee. Under her semi-coherent direction, they reached a low wall behind the Grand Luck. Fortunately, Wu Xuechun was slender. Using both hands, Luo Wenzhou managed to push her atop the wall before vaulting nimbly over it himself. When he landed on the ground on the other side, the pain in his left arm went from a dull ache to excruciating, stabbing agony. He winced and let out a hiss. A frigid evening breeze blew over them, the bone-chilling cold piercing his back through his blood-soaked shirt.

Wu Xuechun nearly screamed in fright when she finally got a good look at him under the streetlights. Turning to her, Luo Wenzhou asked, “Which way now?”

Trembling, Wu Xuechun pointed, and once again Luo Wenzhou immediately dragged her into a frantic run.

“Don’t worry,” he comforted her, even as they sprinted wildly. “They didn’t get my face.”

Wu Xuechun wasn’t certain how she should respond.

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THE PAIR DASHED through a series of alleyways. After several twists and turns, they finally reached a main road, and Luo Wenzhou’s pounding heart began to settle back down.

“Come back to the city bureau with me,” he told Wu Xuechun, who was gasping for air. “Then—” He cut himself off abruptly.

The lively street vendors who had previously populated both sides of the road were giving them a wide berth, and there were no pedestrians to be seen. In their stead, a few revving motorcycles blocked the road. They’d clearly been waiting for him for a while.

Luo Wenzhou glanced surreptitiously at his watch. His backup shouldn’t be far off; he just needed to delay a little longer. Steeling himself, he pushed Wu Xuechun behind him and aimed a sly smile at the motorcyclist at the front of the brigade. “Hey, bro. Looks like there’s been some sort of misunderstanding. Want to get off, and we can have a little chat?”

But the motorcyclist didn’t have the villainous habit of launching into lengthy monologues. He stared through his helmet at Luo Wenzhou with a cold, eerie glint in his eye. Then he revved the engine, and the motorcycle shot forward, charging at them at an aggressive speed.

Luo Wenzhou was finally out of options. He gripped the gun in his pocket.

Just before he drew it, the screech of a car engine rang out. It was even more obnoxious than the growls of the motorcycles. The bikers, who had never expected that anyone would be stupid enough to street race in a place like this, instantly broke formation as they all rushed to get away.

A four-seater sports car, its paint job as bright as the skin of a venomous snake, appeared like a bolt from the blue. As it performed a perfect donut it happened to scrape a moving motorcycle’s back wheel, sending both the bike and its rider flying.

From behind the driver's-side window peeked the driver's side profile, although it was partially obscured by their long hair. The driver didn't look at Luo Wenzhou; all they said was, "Get in."

Chapter 15

FEI DU'S SUDDEN APPEARANCE, as if he'd just dropped out of the sky, shocked both Luo Wenzhou and the group of criminals. But the situation was so dangerous that Sergeant Luo decided not to risk running his mouth. He stuffed Wu Xuechun into the back seat of the car decisively, then jumped into the passenger seat. He wasn't even fully seated yet when the four wide-open car doors smoothly swung themselves shut, and the car sped off with a roar.

The force of their acceleration nearly flattened Luo Wenzhou into the back of his seat. "Why do I get the sense that you're not emotionally stable right n—hey!"

Fei Du wasn't looking at him, but unfortunately, the smell of blood wasn't confined to one's sightlines—it was flowing ceaselessly into the young man's nose. He was already dizzy from the car's acceleration, and the mobile blood bag next to him only made matters worse. This double assault had plunged the hematophobic Fei-zong from his handsome donut maneuver straight onto an unhandsome collision course with the pole of a nearby streetlight.

As Luo Wenzhou's tone suddenly changed, a vein jumped in Fei Du's temple. In the last possible moment, he veered away. The streetlight, which had seen its life flash before its eyes, barely had time to catch its breath before it saw the car bounce up and then down again unevenly—Fei-zong had accidentally hit a curb.

Luo Wenzhou pulled on his seatbelt as fast as he could, feeling like he'd escaped from a dragon's nest right into a tiger's den. The criminals hadn't managed to kill him, but Fei Du's suicidal driving might. "Can your driving get any worse?!" he yelled.

Fei Du didn't dare breathe too heavily, since he smelled blood every time he took a breath. "Who told you to sit up here? I'm about to throw up!"

Luo Wenzhou was astonished. Throw up at the sight of such a handsome, dashing young man? What was his problem?

Cold sweat poured off Fei Du in waves. He almost couldn't see the road clearly, and he was so far beyond maintaining his suave demeanor that he even cursed at Luo Wenzhou: "I have a phobia of blood, asshole! Cover it up a little!"

Luo Wenzhou froze. He'd always thought it was a joke that blood made Fei Du faint; he clearly remembered that that hadn't been a problem when Fei Du was younger. As soon as she heard Fei Du, Wu Xuechun passed a jacket up from the back seat, sharp as ever. Luo Wenzhou shook it out and draped it over himself. "Tch. Well, *I* get carsick. Why…" He trailed off. "Fuck—are these people insane?"

Luo Wenzhou had wanted to ask Fei Du why he was there, but when he glanced in the rearview mirror, he saw the motorcycles still chasing them. It was way too brazen. Although night had fallen, they were still on a major road in a law-abiding society.

Meanwhile, Huang Jinglian was shocked that an entire group had failed to subdue Luo Wenzhou on their own turf. Still, it was too late to turn back now. At this point they couldn't give up; they might as well go all out.

It probably only took about three steps for an “ordinary” person to get from “wisely accepting reality” to “becoming a wanted criminal.”

And, though it seemed illogical that a top-tier sports car could be so easily surrounded by a bunch of motorcycles, that was unfortunately just how traffic worked in reality—especially in an area like Huashi’s West Side, where the roads were complicated, long, and contained obstructions. In some places, not even a rocket could’ve outrun a mobility scooter labeled *Designated for Grandkid Pickup*. Fei Du was unfamiliar with this area to begin with; now, driving in the dark with no time to program his GPS, he could only follow his instincts—instincts numbed by the *contaminant* next to him. It was a treacherous drive indeed.

Fei Du’s hands and feet felt cold from nausea, and his stomach was rebelling, threatening to lurch upward at any moment. Even his heartbeat was starting to feel irregular. He clutched the steering wheel so tightly that his hands were white, saying through gritted teeth, “Tell me you didn’t come alone.”

Perhaps due to blood loss, Luo Wenzhou really was starting to get car sick. “I didn’t come alone,” he said unhesitatingly, desperate not to shock his already unstable getaway driver. “I have backup. You won’t need us to pay for your car repairs, right?”

Wu Xuechun interrupted him, letting out a shrill scream. A motorcycle had gained on them, and its driver swung a metal bat fiercely at Fei Du’s window. Miraculously, the window clung to life; it didn’t shatter, but it did crack, spiderweb-like.

Seeing that things weren’t going well, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t help yelling at Fei Du, “What kind of useless flashy car is this? If you had the

money, why didn't you buy one that was bulletproof?"

Fei Du glanced in the rearview mirror and jerked the wheel harshly, skillfully pushing the bat-wielding motorcyclist to the side. The biker didn't react in time, and the motorcycle's front wheel hit the curb, flipping both itself and its rider over. Fei Du pinched his nose shut. "I'm not the president!" he shot back. "Whose bullets would I have been avoiding?!"

One of them was definitely unlucky enough to have been a crow in their past life,[13] because before Fei Du even finished speaking, a loud crack came from the back window. Luo Wenzhou reacted first, his hair standing on end. "Get down, lady! They're actually using guns!"

Wu Xuechun immediately curled up with her arms around her head. In the same moment, another motorcycle rushed up alongside them. The rider raised his arm, revealing the dark barrel of a gun. Without a single word, he shot at them. Fortunately, few of the world's evildoers were skilled at *everything*. Despite having a gun, the biker clearly didn't know how to use it—he was basically shooting blind. Even so, if he fired as many bullets as possible, one or two were bound to hit the mark.

Indeed, one bullet pierced the passenger-side window. With no other options left to him, Luo Wenzhou turned to the side to shield Fei Du, flattening him against the steering wheel. The bullet grazed Luo Wenzhou's shoulder and struck the windshield.

This terrifying moment didn't register in Fei-zong's conscious mind at all, though. He didn't feel grateful; he felt like he might keel over from the smell of blood. He couldn't stand it anymore, and amid all the panic, he wriggled a hand free, grabbed his car's air freshener, and sprayed it furiously at Luo Wenzhou's head without aiming.

When Fei Du inexplicably turned him into a perfume tester stick, Luo Wenzhou's knees went soft; he was ready to kneel before Fei-zong's sheer fussiness, which somehow seemed to know no fear.

Fei Du spotted an empty alleyway and stomped down on the gas pedal. He yanked the steering wheel and turned, hugging the right side of the road so that the motorcyclist with the gun wouldn't have the space to catch up to them. But the second he cleared the turn, he slammed on the brakes. Up ahead, at the end of the alleyway, three or four more motorcycles were waiting for them.

Engines roared behind them. They were surrounded, trapped in the alley.

Fei Du glanced around with a blank face, his complexion frighteningly pale. His equally pale hand squeezed the paddle shifter as he kept revving the engine loudly. The car was like a furious, injured beast shifting its weight on the spot. At any moment, it could launch a deadly attack.

"If I ran them over one by one," Fei Du said lightly, "would that count as self-defense?"

The engine's revving was too loud. Luo Wenzhou saw Fei Du's colorless lips moving, but he couldn't hear a word. Somehow, though, he understood Fei Du's expression. His heart lurched, and he grabbed Fei Du's hand, which still rested on the paddle shifter. That hand was cool and stiff, and an icy strength coursed through it, making it feel like dull metal.

Just then, another police siren rang out. Red and blue lights seemed to flash across half the sky.

The cavalry had arrived.

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IT TOOK NEARLY all his strength, but Luo Wenzhou finally managed to peel Fei Du's hand off the paddle shifter. The sports car's engine gradually quieted, and silence fell inside the heavily damaged vehicle.

Their backup was highly capable. The moment they arrived, they gained control of the scene, cleanly disarming the motorcyclists. An ambulance was just behind; they had thought of everything.

Lang Qiao ran over first and leaned on the car door. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. "Boss, are you all right?" she panted. "You scared me to death!"

Luo Wenzhou smiled at her, but before he could say anything, Fei Du stumbled out of the car. He walked wordlessly to the edge of the road and threw up.

Luo Wenzhou instructed Lang Qiao on their next steps until he was personally stopped by Deputy Lu and stuffed into the ambulance. The sergeant thought the old man was making a big deal out of nothing; he didn't consider his injuries serious at all. Even as he was dragged into the ambulance, he continued issuing instructions, clinging to the vehicle's door. "Chen Zhen might still be alive. I don't think they had any reason to kill him immediately. Go to the Grand Luck and search it carefully. And go to the district bureau to grab Ma Xiaowei ASAP. You need to get him out

before news reaches Wang Hongliang. Fuck—they've probably already heard by now… Okay, okay, Doctor, I'm coming. Just let me finish…"

Compared to the chatty Luo Wenzhou, his ambulance buddy was much better behaved. The criminals hadn't harmed a hair on Fei-zong's head, but he threw up so much afterward that he'd wound up dehydrated, so the ambulance team dragged him away too.

***

THE NIGHT DRAGGED ON as if it were taking an entire century. In fact, to some people, every second seemed to last an eternity.

The Huashi District Bureau was completely silent. Xiao Haiyang, who was on duty, clutched a cell phone tightly. His partner was fast asleep. Xiao Haiyang made his way to Ma Xiaowei's holding cell, careful to avoid being seen.

The phone's screen displayed a text message: *We were caught. Tell Director Wang immediately. Get rid of Ma Xiaowei. This is incredibly URGENT!*

Ma Xiaowei was sleeping curled up. He twitched occasionally, seemingly suffering from a nightmare. That childish face of his had grown thin and haggard; he looked like a monkey.

Xiao Haiyang entered the cell quickly. He shot a cautious glance behind him, then grabbed Ma Xiaowei's shoulder. Startled awake, Ma Xiaowei jolted; he was about to shout when Xiao Haiyang covered his mouth.

The kid's eyes went wide with shock.

***

AFTER THE HOSPITAL took care of his injuries, Luo Wenzhou felt like a new man, at peak physical strength—he could *easily* deal with another soccer team's worth of criminals. He strolled leisurely over to Fei Du, paying a visit to his "savior," only to spot an IV attached to fragile Fei-zong. Fei Du was leaning back in the bed with his eyes closed, looking as though he was on his last breath. From the outside, it wouldn't have been clear which one of the pair had been stabbed.

Reaching Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou kicked his foot lightly. "Other people *faint* at the sight of blood. How come you look like you've got morning sickness?"

Fei Du huffed in Luo Wenzhou's direction, not opening his eyes. "Stay away from me."

"I'm all cleaned up," Luo Wenzhou informed him, callously sitting down beside his bed. "I finally treated you to a meal, and you hurled it all."

"I don't miss it," Fei Du said expressionlessly.

Luo Wenzhou thought about the unfortunate little cafeteria at the bureau and found that he couldn't critique that statement. Moving on, he asked, "How did you find me?"

This time, Fei Du played dead, not answering.

Luo Wenzhou aimed another kick at him. “Did you follow me? Why?”

In the face of such boorish goading, Fei Du would normally have given the other party a cold glance that said “Stop fucking with me, dumbass,” then changed the topic. Right now, though, he was in too much discomfort. His stomach felt like it was doing somersaults, sharp pains occasionally stabbing through him, and he still felt like he could detect the ever-lingering scent of blood. Every time he opened his eyes, the world spun around him, but the menopausal asshole next to him just wouldn’t leave him alone. Irate over all this, Fei Du let out an involuntary snort of derision.

Luo Wenzhou seized the opportunity to get answers. “If you weren’t following me, then what were you—a rich young heir—doing in those slums?”

Fei Du reclined against the snow-white hospital pillow, his brow knitting. Gathering all the self-restraint he could muster, he just barely avoided swearing. “I went to see the place where He Zhongyi lived.” He Zhongyi had lived close to the Grand Luck, and the two streets were similar.

Although Luo Wenzhou waited a while, Fei Du didn’t continue. He glanced at Fei Du, then suddenly had a thought. “Were you lost?”

Fei Du turned away without responding, pretending Luo Wenzhou’s words were just a passing fart.

Luo Wenzhou stared, surprised by Fei Du’s rare display of mortification. Fei Du suddenly struck him as much more mortal than normal; for the first time, he seemed real and approachable. Quickly, while

Fei Du still came off as a human, Luo Wenzhou adopted a serious manner and asked, “Did you go look at He Zhongyi’s residence for that old lady?”

Fei Du was silent for a while. “That place is remote and in disrepair to boot,” he said finally in a low voice. “It’s messy too—all kinds of people live there. There’s a public toilet nearby, and when the weather’s overcast, the entire street stinks. The conditions are way worse than in most rentals in this city. People only live there because it’s cheap. Most of them have relatives who depend on them—elders, children, or someone sick. They take on backbreaking work to save money for their families. There are also gamblers and addicts who don’t have two cents to rub together. The inhabitants have no choice but to live there.”

“Well, He Zhongyi didn’t do drugs. And according to his friends, he never gambled—he saved money wherever he could.” Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin. “He kept detailed records of all his transactions, and he always drew a minus sign in front of all his income…”

“He was probably in debt.” Fei Du opened his eyes. “And this mysterious lender probably told him, ‘If you borrow money from me, you can’t tell anyone about me.’”

Luo Wenzhou furrowed his brow. The further they dug into He Zhongyi’s life, the less he believed that this innocent young man could’ve been involved in a drug gang. But despite how far the investigation had gotten, things weren’t becoming clearer. They were as murky as ever.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Never mind. We’ve caught all the mice now. As for whether there’s a connection, well, let’s see if interrogation can turn up anything useful.”

Fei Du made a vague noise of agreement and closed his eyes again, prepared to go back to ignoring Luo Wenzhou.

The pair sat in silence for a while. But since the two of them were—at least for now—"companions" who'd suffered a hardship together, Luo Wenzhou suddenly rubbed his nose and said, "I still don't understand something… Back then, Tao Ran, the forensic doctor, and I decided your case together. Older, more experienced forensic doctors and police were even brought in, just to ensure that we hadn't reached the wrong conclusion… But we all agreed on the outcome. So how come you only have a grudge against me?"

Fei Du snorted.

"It's okay. You can tell the truth. I won't get mad," Luo Wenzhou said politely but disingenuously.

That really did convince Fei Du to be frank. "Because I hate your attitude. You think everyone else is blind, and that you're the only capable one, like you alone have this X-ray vision that sees through everything."

Luo Wenzhou paused. Okay, that *did* make him mad. But just then, his phone buzzed, and when he looked down at it, his expression immediately changed. All his anger dissipated immediately.

"Um…" he said weakly after a long silence. "Uh…"

Fei Du shot him a bewildered glance.

"My coworker said that your car is…quite badly damaged. And it's an imported vehicle, so it'll probably have to be shipped abroad to get it fixed."

"I know. So?"

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath and decided to swallow his pride. The words tumbled out of his mouth in one go. “They said that the repairs are so pricey, they’ll cost about the same as buying a new car and we don’t have enough in our Foundation for Justice and Courage[14] fund and our reward budget combined. What if we get you a banner instead?”[15]

Fei Du stared at him. The moment the words left his mouth, Luo Wenzhou regretted them. He yearned to lift his coworker by the feet to drain the water in his brain—which organ had he used to come up with such a stupid idea?!

After a moment, though, Fei Du burst into laughter. It wasn’t fake or insincere this time; he really couldn’t hold it in. Luo Wenzhou felt a mixture of awkwardness and resignation, unsure whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

Before he could untangle this mess of emotions, his phone rang again. This time, it was Lang Qiao, and her tone was grave. “Sergeant Luo, we found Chen Zhen. He’s dead.”

Luo Wenzhou’s demeanor went from relaxed to serious in a heartbeat. He sat bolt upright. “What?”

“And one of the suspects sent a text before we apprehended him telling someone to take care of Ma Xiaowei. I’ve already got people on the way, but I don’t know whether they’ll get there in time.”

Lang Qiao had quickly relayed two pieces of bad news, and Luo Wenzhou had only just hung up when another call came in. This one was from Tao Ran, who was supposed to be taking time off for once.

“Tao Ran, I’m busy right now,” Luo Wenzhou said quickly, distracted. “Can you wait—”

“Sergeant Luo, Zhang Donglai’s lawyer just contacted me,” Tao Ran interrupted. “He said that he spotted a very suspicious tie in Zhang Donglai’s car.”

Chapter 16

"OFFICER TAO, if the tests confirm that I just overreacted, can you keep this secret for me?"

This was the third call Mr. Liu had placed to Tao Ran, and the gist was the same: "If I could travel back in time half an hour, I'd chop off the hand I called you with." Tao Ran heaved an exasperated sigh. This lawyer might well be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Mr. Liu continued to babble. "If you don't, I really won't be able to continue in my field. Ah—what have I done? Please, please, please don't tell anyone, Officer Tao. My life's in your hands."

Tao Ran could only promise for the umpteenth time. He didn't know how he could make his sincerity any clearer, short of signing his name and stamping his fingerprint on an official document. That overly cautious lawyer finally sounded satisfied at his words, however, and agreed to bring the tie to the city bureau for analysis.

Once he was rid of Mr. Liu, Tao Ran shot an abashed smile over his shoulder at the girl in the back seat. "Sorry."

Mr. Liu's call had interrupted them in the middle of a movie. The main couple in the film had just gotten into a fight, but thanks to the call, Tao Ran and his date had no choice but to leave the theater as the angry bickering and crying of the couple onscreen resounded. It certainly wasn't an auspicious first date.

The girl didn't say anything—though, for all Tao Ran knew, she could have been swearing a blue streak in her head. Perhaps it was only

good manners that kept her from showing her irritation outwardly. She even said very kindly, “No need to see me home if you’re busy.” She turned to the taxi driver. “Excuse me—could you stop at the subway just ahead? After that, you can take him where he needs to go.”

Tao Ran felt his ears go a little red. This couldn’t have been more awkward for him. “That…wouldn’t be very…”

“Don’t worry,” the girl said. “I tend to get called back to work on the weekends for OT too. Anyway, when we do overtime at my work, it’s just for our boss. But you’re doing it for the safety of the public. And I saw the news online about that rich nepo baby killing someone. You guys need to solve it quick.”

“I-it might not be that rich guy,” Tao Ran said, stammering a little. “We…we…haven’t identified the killer.”

The taxi arrived at the subway entrance. Stopping the car with a smile, the driver waited for the girl to get out and wave goodbye to Tao Ran.

Before leaving, the girl turned back to say, “To be honest, Tao Ran, it was good to see an old school friend again so far from home. It’s just that the way we reunited was a little awkward.”

Had there been a crack in the floor, Tao Ran would’ve jumped in without hesitation.

He lived in a different city now. What were his chances of getting matched up with a high school friend for a blind date? A high school friend he’d had a secret crush on, no less?

But it was all for nothing. He could have been matched up with Audrey Hepburn, and he'd still have had to abandon her now to rush back to work.

Tao Ran's intellectual powers had taken a heavy blow, and they only recovered to an average level after he'd watched the girl disappear into the subway station. He heaved a long sigh, shook his head to return his swampy brain fluids to their normal state, and shifted his focus back to the case.

The taxi driver, who'd been watching him from the side, offered his opinion. "I think you've got a chance, young man. That girl seems really into you."

Tao Ran chuckled bitterly. "Could you do a U-turn up ahead? I'm heading to the Municipal Public Security Bureau."

The middle-aged taxi driver had an avid interest in gossip and news. He had tons of opinions on both love and the "nepo-baby murder case," and he was eager to share them with Tao Ran. At that point, Tao Ran began to regret rejecting his asshole friends' offers to lend him their cars. To shut up the chatterbox next to him, he could only pretend to nod off. He connected his earphones to his phone, opened an audio app, and put the earphones in.

The words of the audiobook, and its background music, slowly trickled into his ears. "'…If I'm contemptuous of myself,' Julien answered coldly, 'What do I have left?'"

This app was for a really niche audiobook platform. It didn't have many current bestselling titles; most of the books in its catalogue were boring old classics. It usually offered random readings of sleep-inducing prose. Specific books could only be requested by users who volunteered as "reading leaders," and the platform required those "leaders" to submit

lengthy analyses of the books requested. A requested book could only be played on the platform if the user's analysis was chosen by the editor. At the end of that book, the platform would also share the analysis with the audience.

Tao Ran wasn't listening too closely. He was just using the audiobook to block out noise so that he could gather his thoughts.

The taxi reached the local road approaching the city bureau quickly. As Tao Ran was about to close the app, he heard the audiobook's conclusion: "That was *The Red and the Black* by the famous French author Stendhal. Now we'll share an analysis from a user called 'The Reciter,' who requested this book."

Tao Ran froze as the username struck him like a bolt of lightning.

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FRIDAY NIGHTS WERE MEANT to be lovely and relaxing; the city was full of people kicking back to usher in the weekend. Not the members of the city bureau's criminal investigation team, though; they were all either working overtime, or en route to work overtime.

After Luo Wenzhou received Tao Ran and Lang Qiao's calls, he could no longer sit still at the hospital. Coincidentally, Fei Du felt likewise—not because he had something to do, but because the public hospital was too crowded and not up to his standards. With the two of them in agreement for once, their efficiency doubled. Fei Du promptly called his assistant with

instructions to send a car over, and Luo Wenzhou shamelessly mooched a ride off him.

At that point, it was nearly ten at night. Lang Qiao sent Luo Wenzhou a message, updating him on the latest progress. After he read it, Luo Wenzhou didn't speak for a long time. Then he said, suddenly and without warning, "The forensic doctor determined that Chen Zhen died of a drug overdose following a single injection."

After listening to Luo Wenzhou's one-sided chitchat in the hospital, Fei Du had a basic understanding of the events that had led to the demise of his beloved car. In this other car, the stinging smell of blood was absent, and the temperature was nice and comfortable. Fei Du had eaten the late-night snack his assistant brought him, and he drove the car smoothly, stopping to wait for a red light at the intersection. He took a few sips of banana milk, and the sweet drink soothed him enough for him to reply to Luo Wenzhou. "Weird. Doesn't seem very smart."

At the word "smart," Luo Wenzhou couldn't help rolling his eyes. "I've never dared to set the bar high for criminals."

"That's not what I meant," Fei Du responded. "A person can't take risks all the time, no matter how evil they are. Like those guys who were trying to kill you. They ended up firing at you out on the street because they'd already exposed themselves to you. They knew that, if you got away, it was game over for them. There's a cause and effect there: They went crazy because they feared consequences. It didn't happen for no reason. Truly insane people can't usually last long in society."

Luo Wenzhou frankly agreed with him on that point, because Wu Xuechun had told him that Chen Zhen was safe. Assuming she wasn't lying,

Huang Jinglian and the others hadn't planned on killing Chen Zhen—from what she'd seen, at least. And if they intended to kill Chen Zhen or Luo Wenzhou himself right from the get-go, they wouldn't have allowed him to spend so long chatting with Wu Xuechun.

But Chen Zhen had died from a single injection. That didn't sound like an accident.

"Injecting him with drugs does sound like something they'd do," Fei Du went on, analyzing the situation calmly. "Then again, it would be weird for people who've dealt with drugs for years to mess up the dosage and kill someone by accident. If I were suspected of covering up for a drug-dealing gang, and a random stranger inadvertently came snooping around with some sensitive information, I'd never be so rash as to kill him."

Fei Du's casual tone sent a shiver down Luo Wenzhou's spine—he sounded as if he were just talking about the weather. But Fei Du's opinions were always worth listening to, so Luo Wenzhou ignored his spine and asked, "What would you do?"

"First, I'd get him under my control, figure out his background and how much he knew, and whether he was acting on someone else's orders," Fei Du said, his breath reminiscent of his banana milk. "Then I'd use drugs or violence to scare and threaten him—weaken his resolve. Once I learned that he had only just recently gotten in contact with you, wasn't really an informant, and had a simple background with no friends or family, I'd proceed to step two. For step two, I'd force more drugs on him until he was addicted. While he was high and not thinking straight, I'd tell him, over and over, that you betrayed him. I'd brainwash him so that he believed you were actually working with those other guys. He'd quickly believe that there's no

justice in this world and sink into despair. If people like him want to survive, they need to learn to admit defeat."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him for a while. "You really are terrible."

Fei Du paid him no mind. "Step three: Once he was fully addicted, I'd slowly give him some benefits to show that we weren't all that scary; in fact, we're even kind. That's all I'd need to do. He'd develop Stockholm syndrome, and I'd have control over him, mentally and physiologically. By the time you guys figured out how to get him out, I'd only need to tell him that we were having an internal conflict over the distribution of spoils and that you were trying all kinds of methods to undermine me. He'd still hate you for betraying him, and that would turn him into a nail that I could hammer right into the center of your organization."

This time—perhaps because the mood between them was calmer now, or perhaps because it was hard to get serious when the scent of banana milk lingered in the air—Luo Wenzhou didn't lose his temper over Fei Du's ridiculous hypotheticals. He was silent for a long while, then said abruptly, "If you decide to break the law one day, it might actually be a huge problem for us."

Fei Du gave him a noncommittal smile.

"But this is just idle chitchat, and you're just talking to me. You've never put any of this into practice, and you're not running all over the world holding 'How to Kill People Without a Trace' classes. Thanks to that, we actually have time to take little breaks or even go on dates outside working hours. On behalf of the organization, you have my gratitude."

This reaction wasn't like Luo Wenzhou. Fei Du gave him a weird look.

Luo Wenzhou nodded. “I should get you another banner,” he said amiably. “Is there anything else you’d like to add? Tell me, and I can consider it.”

Fei Du shut his mouth. He didn’t utter so much as a punctuation mark until they arrived at the Yancheng Municipal Bureau.

Luo Wenzhou had just stepped out of the car at the entrance to the bureau when a police car wheeled up and came to an abrupt stop right beside him. Lang Qiao jumped out of it. “Boss! Ma Xiaowei disappeared!”

“Don’t shout.” Luo Wenzhou’s back had only just been stitched back together, and he still couldn’t quite move right. Grabbing a cigarette with one hand, he added leisurely, “That’s a good thing.”

Lang Qiao’s huge eyes grew even larger in shock. Just as she was about to say something, her gaze landed on something behind Luo Wenzhou. “That’s…”

Following her gaze, Luo Wenzhou turned and saw a small, skinny, timid figure on the opposite sidewalk, looking toward the Municipal Public Security Bureau. Another figure walked over to him and led him across the street.

Lang Qiao gasped. “It’s Ma Xiaowei and that guy with crooked glasses!”

In fact, Xiao Haiyang had finally replaced his broken glasses. The new frames, which were square and slightly rigid, made him look significantly older. He led Ma Xiaowei to Luo Wenzhou. “Sergeant Luo.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t seem at all surprised to see him. He nodded amicably. “Let’s head in.”

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AT THE CITY BUREAU, there was no sign that it was the weekend. The forensics and criminal investigation teams were both racing to examine the victim and tie, as well as question the witness and suspects. He Zhongyi's mother was still staying in the office temporarily, and inevitably, she was startled. Any time there was a commotion in the bureau, she came out for a peek.

When Luo Wenzhou and his people led in Ma Xiaowei and the others, they ran into He Zhongyi's mother in the hallway. She stood up when she saw Luo Wenzhou; then her suspicious gaze landed on Ma Xiaowei.

"That's He Zhongyi's mother," Luo Wenzhou told Ma Xiaowei.

Ma Xiaowei's listless footsteps came to a halt, and he stared at her in shock and fear.

The skinny, weak woman and frail young man looked at each other for a long time. Perhaps Ma Xiaowei reminded her of her son, because He Zhongyi's mother asked him tentatively, "Did…did you know my son?"

Ma Xiaowei took half a step back.

"My Zhongyi was a good kid. You knew him, right?" The woman took a trembling step forward. Her eyes were desperate, and as she looked at Ma Xiaowei, tears came pouring out of them. She held her chin up high

and took a long, thin breath. “Who killed him? Huh? Tell me, child. Who killed him?”

The rims of Ma Xiaowei’s eyes went red. Then, without warning, he fell to his knees with an audible thump.

“Me! It was me!” He started to sob. “I did Zhongyi-ge wrong. I did *you* wrong… I’m so sorry…”

Chapter 17

THIS WAS THE SECOND TIME Ma Xiaowei had admitted to killing someone at a police station. The astounding young man cried even harder than the victim's mother, nearly slamming his head into the floor in remorse. Two officers beside him reacted quickly, hauling him up. He Zhongyi's mother's wails followed them as they dragged him away.

Luo Wenzhou felt a headache coming on. He hadn't anticipated that simple introduction leading to such melodrama. Somehow, he just knew that he was in for an all-nighter, and he quickly texted his property manager, begging them to please toss the starving Luo Yiguo a handful of cat food.

Lang Qiao was about to lead Fei Du off to take his statement when Luo Wenzhou stopped them. "Hey," he said, not addressing anyone in particular. "Thanks."

Fei Du was slightly surprised; he'd never expected an acknowledgment to come out of Luo Wenzhou's mouth. He stopped in his tracks and nodded with the gravity of a president making his inaugural speech. "No problem."

With a single arched brow, Luo Wenzhou watched Fei Du walk off; as perfect as a model when viewed from the back. For some reason, he reminded Luo Wenzhou of a proud, arrogant poodle. Luo Wenzhou really wanted to run up to him and stick an aristocratic cane in his hand, but they'd been at each other's throats for seven years, and since it was looking like the hope of a ceasefire was finally on the horizon, he didn't want to

start something again for no reason. He pushed the fanciful whim back down and turned around to pat Xiao Haiyang on the shoulder. “Come with me.”

Xiao Haiyang followed him silently into an interrogation room. He adjusted his glasses nervously, but when he looked at Luo Wenzhou, his gaze was unwavering. “I’m not here as an officer involved in the case anymore, am I?”

“Sit,” Luo Wenzhou replied, gesturing to Xiao Haiyang. “If not, what do you think you’re here as?”

Xiao Haiyang sat down, his back ramrod straight. “Am I a suspect or a witness?”

Luo Wenzhou smiled. Out of habit, he crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, but his freshly injured back immediately protested, screaming at his nervous system. He nearly grimaced from the pain, but he held onto his composed veneer through sheer willpower. Hastily, and a bit clumsily, he sat up straight again and sucked in a silent breath of pain. “How many years have you been at this job?”

“Two years… No, one and a half,” Xiao Haiyang replied.

“Oh. So you just finished interning recently, right?” Luo Wenzhou nodded and spent a few moments reminiscing. Then he continued, “When I was young, my dad wanted me to go to military school, but I was still in my rebellious phase and always did the opposite of what he wanted. I said, ‘No way am I going to the Sahara to study missiles,’ then ran to school and filled out a bunch of paperwork at random. Hong Kong police films were a big influence on me at the time, and I thought all policemen were like Tony Leung or Louis Koo. That’s how I ended up in this field.”

“The Sahara isn’t on Chinese soil,” Xiao Haiyang replied somberly.

Luo Wenzhou peered at him. *This young man sure has the gift of gab.*

Xiao Haiyang seemed to realize that his response was odd as well, because he sat up even straighter. “Please continue.”

Thinking that perhaps trying to help Xiao Haiyang relax was a lost cause, Luo Wenzhou gave up. Getting serious, he asked directly, “Whether you’re a peer who did something praiseworthy, a witness, or a suspect depends on this investigation’s results. I’m sure you’re prepared for that. And you’re ready to tell me everything you know, right?”

Xiao Haiyang nodded.

“All right,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Let’s start with the most recent thing: Why did you bring Ma Xiaowei here tonight?”

“Because someone wanted to kill him to silence him,” Xiao Haiyang replied without hesitating. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket, already safely secured in an evidence bag, and handed it to Luo Wenzhou. “I was on duty with a colleague tonight. This is his phone. He was asleep when the message came in.”

Luo Wenzhou quickly scanned the text message’s contents. They matched up with what Lang Qiao had said, so he set the phone aside. “Why were you looking at someone else’s texts?”

“Because I was keeping an eye on him,” Xiao Haiyang replied.

The young man spoke very quickly, and he didn’t really smile. When he spoke, his body language was tense, and he often fidgeted, adjusting his glasses or clenching his fists. He seemed less like a worldly adult and more like a middle school boy who hadn’t grown into his gangly limbs yet.

Looking at him, Luo Wenzhou mused that if Fei Du could lend Xiao Haiyang some of his suave smoothness, they might both be normal. “How come you were keeping an eye on him?”

Xiao Haiyang pursed his lips. “Can I start from the beginning?”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. Xiao Haiyang took a deep breath, considered for a while, and then began clearly and carefully, “Our office environment is different from the city bureau’s. We almost never see Director Wang unless there’s an important event, or something serious happens. What orders he gives always come to us through Sergeant Huang—that is, Huang Jinglian, the head of the criminal investigation team at the Huashi District Bureau.

“Huang Jinglian isn’t actually that close with his deputy. Rather, he has an inner circle of a few people, and a few others he’s focusing on ‘training and developing.’ When Huang Jinglian wants something, he just tells one of his confidants to look after it. Sometimes we don’t even know what he’s doing. The deputy is basically just a figurehead with no power at all.

“I always thought Huang Jinglian just played favorites, so I didn’t pay much attention. After all, I’d never been part of a group like that in my entire life. Then there came a day when a station within our jurisdiction reported a case: They’d found a woman’s corpse. I happened to be on duty that night and planned to head over to take a look. I was just about to leave when a colleague stopped me—the owner of that cell phone. He said something had come up with his family, so he couldn’t come to work the next day, and he asked if we could switch shifts. Trading shifts like that is

common, so I agreed without thinking much about it. In the end, it was Huang Jinglian and that colleague who went to investigate."

"Huang Jinglian went too?" Luo Wenzhou paused. "Who was the deceased?"

"Her name was Chen Yuan."

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes slightly. "Why do you remember that so clearly? Was something special about Chen Yuan to you?"

"I remember most things I've seen," Xiao Haiyang answered calmly. "I still remember the license plate of the car you drove when you first arrived at the scene of the crime for the May twentieth case. If you need—"

Luo Wenzhou didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was like Little Four-Eyes had been drawn in a different art style from the rest of the Huashi District Bureau. Waving his hand, he replied, "No need—I believe you. Please continue."

"But there was something unique about that victim," Xiao Haiyang continued, his tone changing. "I've seen photos of her body at the crime scene. When Chen Yuan died, she was wearing a top with a cutout and a miniskirt. She also wore heavy makeup, but her top was on backward. Some women's clothing is designed with a button in the back. If there isn't a collar, it's easy to mistake that for the front. But it's really easy for the person wearing it to tell that it's on wrong, because it doesn't feel right around the neck and armpits. If the victim put it on like that herself, she would've known immediately that it was backward. So my first instinct was that someone had put those clothes on her after she died. If so, that might've been a murder case. I specifically mentioned that to my colleagues before they went to the crime scene."

Luo Wenzhou tapped the table lightly, but didn't interrupt. He'd also looked up details of Chen Yuan's case, and he remembered that there hadn't been anything wrong with her clothing; the top that Xiao Haiyang was describing wasn't on backward.

"I only found out about the results of that investigation a few days later," Xiao Haiyang went on. "Sergeant Huang and the others had deemed it a case of a prostitute dying of an overdose. I went to ask that colleague about her shirt, and at first, he wouldn't give me a direct answer. Eventually, he just said that I was mistaken." Xiao Haiyang paused for a long time. "I didn't save that photo, and I only took a brief glance at the time. It's possible that I made a mistake. But that afternoon, two thousand yuan randomly appeared on my pay stub, labeled 'bonus.' Our pay isn't all that high. Everyone's just there to make a living and provide for their families, so we're all under a lot of pressure. And, when we do occasionally get bonuses, we definitely all celebrate together. The entire team's mood changes. But that day, no one mentioned a bonus. Sergeant Huang took me aside just before the end of the day and praised me for a few regular tasks I did daily. He said that I worked hard and was responsible, so he'd asked Director Wang to give me specifically the bonus, to encourage people to participate in work *eagerly*. I thought that was a bit of a stretch, so I suspected that it was hush money and never touched it."

Rather than "suspecting," Luo Wenzhou knew immediately that that was exactly what the money was. "But you don't have any proof. Chen Yuan's case report was spotless. There were no flaws in it." Xiao Haiyang's expression tightened, and he nodded unhappily. Luo Wenzhou sighed. "And

then? The other day, at the crime scene, why did you drop that hint that it wasn't the actual location of the crime?"

"After Chen Yuan's case, I thought things over for a while. I was pretty sure there was something sketchy about Huang Jinglian and the others, so I decided not to make a fuss about the bonus." Xiao Haiyang nodded at the phone in the evidence bag next to Luo Wenzhou. "When I got the chance, I installed spyware on that phone, and from that point on, I secretly tracked him every day through the GPS."

Luo Wenzhou was astonished.

"I know that's illegal," Xiao Haiyang rushed to explain, "but there were a lot of courses in my practical training that I only barely passed, so there's no way I could've secretly tailed them. They would've found me out immediately. This was my only option."

"Don't worry. I was just thinking that you might actually be a genius." Luo Wenzhou chuckled. "What'd you discover?"

"After work, he tended to go to different entertainment facilities. And on days divisible by five, if he wasn't on duty, he was always in the same handful of places, one of which was the area near where He Zhongyi's body was found. The other places are all similarly out of the way. I secretly went to a couple of the places on days when they weren't there, but I couldn't find anything. Once, though, when I was pretending to be an out-of-towner asking for directions, an old lady who lived nearby warned me not to go there after dark. She said, 'Sometimes people there snort white powder.'"

"So," said Luo Wenzhou, "you're saying you're certain your coworker was at the location where He Zhongyi's body was found on the night of May twentieth, and you know this from this phone's GPS data."

Xiao Haiyang nodded. “He left work with Huang Jinglian and the others. I suspect they were all present at the scene. They were there until nearly eleven. But… Sergeant Luo, if one of us committed murder, I’d think we’d be a little more professional about it. We wouldn’t just leave the body there, letting things spin so out of control the next day. Ma Xiaowei’s appearance confirmed one of my suspicions: Huang Jinglian and his men did something unspeakable at the crime scene. Maybe there was a verbal altercation and residents nearby heard them. Ma Xiaowei must’ve been one of them. Still, no one knew exactly how the body got there.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded but didn’t offer his opinion. “Where were you on the night of the twentieth?”

“At the station, on duty. It was an overnight shift, so there are paper records and security-camera footage.” Xiao Haiyang’s expression was unchanged. He didn’t seem angry about Luo Wenzhou’s questioning, and his tone remained calm. “Do you think *I* dumped the body? I didn’t. Navigating the West Side’s roads is complicated. You’d need a lot of familiarity with that area to dump a body there without anyone noticing. You’d also need some kind of private vehicle. I don’t have either.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression was placid too, and it wasn’t clear whether he believed Xiao Haiyang. Then he asked, “Have you heard of the Golden Triangle lot?”

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TAO RAN MARCHED OUT of the interrogation room and approached Lang Qiao. “Ma Xiaowei said that the ‘Golden Triangle lot’—the area where He Zhongyi’s body was found—is one of the default places where those guys sell drugs. Only those who participate in drug deals know that name, and they’re not allowed to spread it around. But virtually an entire district bureau is involved in drug trafficking, from the most senior authority down to the officers working under him. This is…” He threw his notes on the table. “That asshole Luo Wenzhou didn’t even give me a heads-up before he went to investigate something this major all by himself. Does he think he’s Captain America?”

“So did Ma Xiaowei really kill He Zhongyi?” Lang Qiao asked curiously.

“I don’t think so. Ma Xiaowei said that after he got hooked, he was constantly broke. Everyone around him knew that about him, so they rarely brought cash home. As a result, Ma Xiaowei set his sights on He Zhongyi’s new phone, and one day he pocketed it. He wanted to trade it for more drugs, but for some reason, when He Zhongyi came home from work that day, he suddenly remembered the phone. When he couldn’t find it, he questioned Ma Xiaowei. Ma Xiaowei played dumb, and in the end, the pair parted on unhappy terms… Hey, Xiao-Qiao, pass me a bottle of water. I haven’t taken a break all night.” Tao Ran took the water from Lang Qiao. He chugged half the bottle before finally catching his breath. “Ma Xiaowei traded He Zhongyi’s phone for drugs that night. After He Zhongyi returned, he would’ve asked to search through Ma Xiaowei’s belongings, so Ma Xiaowei was waiting for him smugly. After all, what could he say after the

search turned up nothing? In the end, though, He Zhongyi never got back. He died."

Lang Qiao put it together immediately. "Ma Xiaowei thought He Zhongyi happened to see him selling the phone, tried to ask for his phone back, and got killed for it? And then the street brawl happened, which was how we took that unexpected statement from Ma Xiaowei. So Wang Hongliang tried to frame him with the phone to cover up the truth? That makes sense, but…who killed He Zhongyi?"

Before Tao Ran could respond, he got a call from the forensics department. He picked up in a hurry. "Hello? How's it going?" Lang Qiao didn't hear what was said on the other end, but Tao Ran's expression grew more and more serious. After he hung up, he asked her, "Did Fei Du leave?"

Luo Wenzhou had just finished his discussion with Xiao Haiyang, and he caught that last question as he walked in through the door. He looked up at them, a little perplexed. "What's up with Fei Du?"

Tao Ran furrowed his brow, but he didn't have time to chew out Luo "Captain China" Wenzhou for his pathological need to be a hero. "The tie that Mr. Liu brought over had Zhang Donglai's fingerprints on it, and initial inspection suggests that it does match up with the marks on the victim's neck. There's even a bit of blood on it, and when He Zhongyi died, there were a few fresh scrapes on his neck. If we rush this, we might get the DNA results as early as tomorrow morning. The forensics team says there's a high possibility that the tie is the murder weapon."

Luo Wenzhou silently took this in. He glanced at his watch; it was almost midnight. "Go after him," he said. "I bet Fei Du hasn't left yet. If he did, he only just headed out. You'll be able to catch him."

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FEI DU REALLY HADN'T LEFT YET. After giving his statement, he'd spent time with He Zhongyi's mom for a while. Whether it was because someone was with her or because the station was still lit up and full of people at such a late hour, she seemed a bit more hopeful. She was quite a bit calmer, too, and she even chatted with Fei Du without prompting.

"Before you came, I think I saw that man from this afternoon, the… What do you call him?" She was talking about Mr. Liu, but suddenly, she couldn't remember his job title. She floundered for a while, but her brain remained a pile of mush, so she decided to skip over it. "Did they find new evidence?"

She was sitting on a comfortable chair; Fei-zong, on the other hand, had nowhere to stretch his long legs out. That said, he also refused to fold them unbecomingly, so his only option was to sit awkwardly and put his legs stiffly to one side. They started to go numb almost immediately. Unable to bear it any longer, he began to massage them. "Perhaps. What are your plans for after they catch the perpetrator? Will you go home?"

He Zhongyi's mother looked down and didn't answer. She peered at the way he was massaging his legs. "You're not a police officer, are you?" she asked. "It's late. Go home."

Despite his numb legs, Fei Du wasn't really tired. For a dissolute young person like him, the night had only just begun; this was the time when he was the most awake. Unfortunately, there were no hotties around

today, just a shriveled, scrawny, middle-aged woman. But Fei Du treated all women—beautiful and young or otherwise—the same. Having seen countless gorgeous flowers in bloom, he'd basically cultivated a state of being in which he was unaffected by others' looks.

"It's okay," Fei Du told He Zhongyi's mother warmly. "I can stay with you for a bit. My mother passed away when I was young. When she was still alive, she was sick and had to take lots of medicine and do lots of treatments, so she couldn't work. My dad was busy with work, though, so he was rarely home. I was in school at the time, and it was pretty far away, so I lived with a nanny closer to school and only went back to see my mother once a week."

He Zhongyi's mother studied Fei Du a little shyly. "Look at you. What a handsome young man. Your mother must have adored you and waited for you to come home every day. When we mothers aren't capable of anything, you kids are all we have left to live for."

Fei Du smiled at her, his expression not changing. "Mm-hmm." Then he noticed that Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran were walking over to them, their expressions heavy from working overtime. Tao Ran waved at him from a few steps away, so Fei Du slowly approached him, giving him a perfect smile. "How was your date, Ge?"

Fei Du excelled at respecting other people's boundaries. He'd agreed to change, and now he was transformed, including his demeanor and the way he spoke. He said he'd behave, so now he was a brother to Tao Ran—and not a step closer.

"Let's not talk about it," Tao Ran said, waving him off. It would be hard to explain briefly. He glanced at He Zhongyi's mother, who was

staring at them, then beckoned Fei Du to join them a little farther away. “Come with us for a bit. We have a few things to ask you.”

“What’s up?” Fei Du asked lazily as he went with them. “Have you finally realized there’s no future in being a police officer? I told you ages ago, the youtiao vendor in my company’s cafeteria is paid better than your sergeant.”

Even in absolute silence, Sergeant Luo was catching strays. He was so indignant it made him hungry. Irritably, he called over an officer on duty and handed them some small bills. “Go buy some youtiao from the twenty-four-hour store.”

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HE ZHONGYI’S MOM sat in her corner, watching them walk off. Her tears had dried, making her eyes even more reflective; within them glowed the cold city in the cold night.

Suddenly, her phone rang. It was a model long forgotten by the modern smartphone market, one that could only be used to make and receive calls. Shaking, she hurriedly picked up the call. “Hello?”

Static crackled on the other end, and then a strange voice came through. “You saw that lawyer, right? He accepted money to help those rich young men, but then it was too much for his conscience. That’s why he came to make a report in the middle of the night. At this point, the police know who the killer is. And they’re still busy, right? That’s because the evidence is ironclad and hard to cover up. Do you believe me now?”

He Zhongyi's mom's dry, cracked lips trembled. "Who is this?" she asked, nearly inaudible.

"Someone trying to help you," the strange voice replied. "Things out there are too complicated for you to understand. They're being nice to you because they're afraid you'll talk and make a fuss. The killer has an impressive background. They're afraid to apprehend him."

Her eyes widened with every word.

"Are you ready?" asked the strange voice.

Meanwhile, Tao Ran led Fei Du to his office. Pulling out a few photos, he pointed at the silvery tie they showed. "Have you seen a tie like that before?" he asked directly.

Fei Du took a cursory glance. "That kind of tie is so basic that practically everyone has one."

"Does Zhang Donglai have one?" Tao Ran asked.

Fei Du paused, and the easy, playful smile on his face all but dissipated. "What're you getting at?"

As Luo Wenzhou watched them, it occurred to him that Fei Du was pretty astute. It was too bad he never did anything useful with that intelligence. "Exactly what you think we're getting at," he said.

Fei Du hesitated for a moment, then reached for the photos. He spent a while examining them. "He actually does own one from this brand. If I remember correctly, Zhang Ting gave it to him. He doesn't usually wear it unless he's visiting his father's company to keep up appearances. Someone once caught him with it on, and he got mocked for ages. But as unreliable

as Lao-Zhang is, he loves his sister. He complains about that tie all the time, but he never got rid of it. What's wrong with it?"

"It was found between the seats of Zhang Donglai's car," Tao Ran said quietly. "His fingerprints are on it, and we suspect it's the murder weapon. Think back for me: On May twentieth, at Chengguang Mansion, was Zhang Donglai wearing that tie?"

"No," Fei Du said immediately. "But the security footage should show that."

"The twentieth was a workday," Tao Ran continued. "Is it possible that he wore it during the day, then took it off that night and left it in his car? Or in his pocket?"

"I don't know." Fei Du's brow furrowed. After a moment, a thought seemed to come to him. "Were the only prints on it Zhang Donglai's?"

Something flashed in Tao Ran's eyes, which answered Fei Du's question. Fei Du stood there silently for a while, his seemingly ever-present smile hardening a bit.

"There's no way Zhang Donglai was the killer," Fei Du said slowly. "If his prints are the only ones you found on that tie, then the killer was planning to frame Zhang Donglai even before they got their hands on it, whether they found the tie or stole it."

He spoke evenly, in the same tone as always, but somehow, Tao Ran got the sense that he was secretly angry.

Yet from the moment Tao Ran had first called and asked Fei Du whether he could provide an alibi for Zhang Donglai, Fei Du had acted like an uninvolved, uncaring third party. Even though he'd come to the station

with Zhang Ting twice afterward, he'd acted as though he was just there to go through the motions of accompanying her. He'd played the part of a casual drinking buddy to perfection. He'd never rushed to defend Zhang Donglai; he'd never even asked how the investigation was going, or whether Zhang Donglai was still a suspect.

"I never thought you'd get mad over Zhang Donglai. I didn't think…" Feeling a little surprised, Tao Ran chose his words carefully. "I didn't think you guys were that close. It didn't seem like you cared very much before."

"I'm not mad. I just think that some people went a little too far." Fei Du turned to smile at him, looking serene and gentle. The facade was immediately ruined when he opened his mouth again. "Can I get a cup of that coffee-flavored oil of yours to wake me up?"

Tao Ran just looked at him. Fei "Not Mad" Du's expression didn't change. Evidently, he didn't realize he'd said anything wrong.

When Fei Du began to drink the instant coffee he'd requested, his expression twisted in disgust; his eyebrows remained knit together until he'd gulped down the entire cup. Then, at last, he slowly let out a breath. "You guys said you didn't have enough evidence when you let Zhang Donglai go. But you knew even then that it wasn't him, right?"

Tao Ran froze, but Luo Wenzhou nodded. "Yes. Those cigarettes you sent over did turn out to have He Zhongyi's DNA on them. When we followed that lead, we discovered that He Zhongyi had taken a bus from Chengguang Mansion to someplace else and been killed there. While that was happening, Zhang Donglai was still at Chengguang Mansion; his alibi's pretty secure. We didn't make that information public when we let him go

because I felt that the killer must be following this case very closely. I predicted that if we let Zhang Donglai go under ambiguous circumstances, they'd make another move, and I was right: They sent us this tie."

"Someone following this case closely was able to plant the weapon in Zhang Donglai's car without him noticing," Fei Du mused. "So the killer must be one of those people who came with me to pick up Zhang Donglai the day he was released. Aside from Zhang Ting and the lawyer, the rest of us were also at Chengguang Mansion on the night of the twentieth." He stretched out his long legs, half leaning and half sitting on Tao Ran's desk. "I'm probably the person who's most involved and has the most interest in this case. Am I the prime suspect?"

"No," Luo Wenzhou said without even considering it. "You could barely find your way through the West Side alleys. You would've had a lot of difficulty dumping a body there."

Fei Du did not respond to this.

"All right, Fei-zong," Luo Wenzhou continued. "We know that you have morals, and that you can even afford youtiao. Your banner is on its way. Now stop throwing this little tantrum and talk to me."

Fei Du stared at Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly for a while, but managed to maintain his elegant demeanor—probably because he'd ripped Luo Wenzhou into eight equally sized pieces in his head. Then he grew serious. "After me, Zhang Donglai's lawyer probably has the most familiarity with this case. He could have orchestrated this whole tie situation. As far as I know, though, the lawyer didn't have much contact with Zhang Donglai before all of this. So it would've been difficult for him to get his hands on that tie before the murder occurred. Also, Mr. Liu

reports directly to Zhang Ting, which means Zhang Ting fits the criteria better—plus, she's had close contact with He Zhongyi. She has no reason to want to harm her brother, but just to be safe, you guys should see whether she has an alibi for the night of the crime." Fei Du paused, then added, "Beyond me, Zhang Ting, and Mr. Liu, there's a fourth person to take into account: Zhang Ting's boyfriend, Zhao Haochang. He's a fairly famous legal advisor specializing in mergers and acquisitions. He was the one who introduced Mr. Liu to Zhang Ting, and he came with Zhang Ting today to pick up her brother. On the night of the crime, Zhao Haochang would've been at Chengguang Mansion and left after dinner—"

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him. "You're sure he left after dinner?"

Fei Du's lips curled into a coy smile. "Well, would *you* want to stay for the 'after-party' with your future brother-in-law there?"

Luo Wenzhou ground his teeth. *Little shit!*

After thinking for a moment, Fei Du asked, "Can you tell me roughly where He Zhongyi went after he left Chengguang Mansion?"

Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou exchanged glances. Luo Wenzhou nodded slightly, so Tao Ran said, "He got off the bus near Wenchang Road. After that, we lose track of him."

Fei Du pulled out a leather card holder, flipped through it, and pulled out a business card:

Rongshun Legal (Yancheng Office)

Zhao Haochang (Tier 2 Partner)

Jinlong Center, Third Floor

103 Wenchang Road

Anping District, Yancheng

Tao Ran stood abruptly. “It’s him!”

Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin gently. He didn’t think things were going to go as smoothly as that. “Don’t be hasty. We don’t have enough proof yet. He Zhongyi got off a bus at Wenchang Road, but it doesn’t necessarily follow that a lawyer working on Wenchang Road is the murderer. Have we got any other leads?”

“When He Zhongyi first arrived in Yancheng, some mysterious person gave him ten thousand yuan,” Fei Du said. “If that person was Zhao Haochang, then that means there was a prior connection between the two of them. He Zhongyi was leaving his home for the first time to find work, but Zhao Haochang might’ve visited his hometown at some point in the past. You guys can ask He Zhongyi’s mother whether she’s seen Zhao Haochang before.”

Luo Wenzhou wasted no time calling Lang Qiao. “Hey, Goggle Eyes, is He Zhongyi’s mother still waiting for updates? If she isn’t sleeping, can you tell her to come to the office?”

Lang Qiao gave a crisp response.

Fifteen minutes passed. Luo Wenzhou had gone through all their current evidence once again, but Lang Qiao still hadn’t brought the woman over. One eyelid twitching, Luo Wenzhou looked up; at that moment, Lang Qiao burst through the door, panting.

“Boss, He Zhongyi’s mother isn’t in the station! We don’t know where she went!”

Chapter 18

"IT'S SO WEIRD," Lang Qiao said. "I checked all the bathrooms, and no one saw her leave… Hey, boss, what is it?"

Even before Luo Wenzhou had wrapped his head around the situation, he felt an inexplicable chill creep up his spine. "Go check the cameras," he told her. "Hurry!"

Lang Qiao froze for only a second before she turned and ran off. The video was quickly pulled up, and it very clearly showed that He Zhongyi's mother had received a call soon after Fei Du left. It was unclear what was said, but after just a few short sentences, it was like she turned to stone. The call lasted around two minutes. After she hung up, she sat there looking dazed for a little bit longer, then got up and did some pacing. She shot quite a few looks in the direction in which Fei Du had left, but Fei Du never returned. Finally, she looked down in disappointment, appeared to come to some sort of decision, and silently left the city bureau.

The security-camera footage only went as far as the front of the station, and He Zhongyi's mother's footsteps were sure and determined. She crossed the street quickly, turned at the next intersection, and disappeared.

Lang Qiao didn't need any prompting from Luo Wenzhou to quickly lead a group of colleagues to the intersection where He Zhongyi's mother had last been. The group split up and spread out, determined to find her.

Tao Ran walked over to Luo Wenzhou speedily. "I just asked Xiao Haiyang, and the district bureau brought her over to us as soon as they'd picked her up from the train station, just as Wang Hongliang instructed.

She's been here ever since. There's no way she's familiar with Yancheng. But the security footage shows that she didn't even look around after she left the station. She crossed the street, then turned a corner. Someone must have been waiting for her."

"Get the security footage from the nearby intersections," Luo Wenzhou instructed. "Check all the cars and passersby."

"That'll be hard. The roads are restricted by license plate number right now, and those affected can only drive between midnight and three a.m. There are plenty of those people, so the roads are a lot busier than normal; there'll be a lot of traffic to go through. If this doesn't end up being a big deal, that's fine, but what if…"

Luo Wenzhou paced in a silent circle. Then he came to a sudden stop, his memory catching up to him. At last, he remembered why he'd felt such unease when Lang Qiao told him the old woman was gone. It was because of what Fei Du had said in the car:

"...so that he believed you were actually working with those other guys. He'd quickly believe that there's no justice in this world and sink into despair. ...I'd have control over him, mentally and physiologically."

How had the person on the phone convinced a timid, frightened woman to walk out of the police station in the middle of the night?

Did she trust that person more than the officers in the station? Or… was it that she didn't trust the police at all?

Did she believe that there was no justice in the world? Had that led her to leave in disappointment? Was she going to seek the justice she wanted in her own way?

Luo Wenzhou turned to Fei Du abruptly. Fei Du was looking down, his face obscured by his long hair. The black shirt he wore only emphasized how pale his skin was. He looked like a vampire who'd never seen sunlight.

For a moment, Luo Wenzhou wondered, *How did he understand those people so easily?* When Fei Du wasn't fooling around with those irresponsible rich spoiled brats—when he was alone—what did he think about?

"I didn't catch it," Fei Du said suddenly, almost as if he were talking to himself.

Luo Wenzhou paused. "What?"

"I asked her, 'What are your plans after they catch the perpetrator?' She didn't answer, just told me to go home."

She'd also said, *"When we mothers aren't capable of anything, you kids are all we have left to live for."* She was sickly and unable to work. What else did she have to hold on for, besides her son? With him gone, what was she supposed to do with the rest of her life? What could she do?

Fei Du rubbed his brow bone with his thumb and forefinger, which he then drew together to pinch the bridge of his nose. He tilted his head to look at Luo Wenzhou and smiled bitterly, as if mocking himself. "How did I miss what she meant? I didn't catch on at all."

Tao Ran immediately sensed that something was wrong. "Are you okay?"

Fei Du glanced at him. "I'm fine," he said nonchalantly. "Why do you ask?"

“When someone dies, we typically focus on the victim and the suspect,” Tao Ran replied. “So it’s true that we often overlook the victim’s family, especially when things get busy. This is all normal, but right now, what’s important is that we find her.”

Fei Du nodded calmly. “Yes. You’re right.”

“Does she think that Zhang Donglai is the killer, and that we only let him go because he’s the director general’s nephew?” Tao Ran asked. “If so, would she go after Zhang Donglai? Should we call the Zhangs?”

“You can call Zhang Donglai and tell him to be careful, but I doubt she’d do that.” As Luo Wenzhou massaged his temples, he accidentally pressed on the bruise on one side of his forehead. He sucked in a harsh breath. “What could she do if she found him? Kill him in revenge? Even if he let her really try, he’s big enough that she probably couldn’t even make a dent. It’d be a waste of her time. And think about this from the murderer’s perspective: There’s no way they’re up in the middle of the night taking He Zhongyi’s mother to sightsee around the city.”

Fei Du grabbed a pen. “But if the person who led her away *is* the killer…” He quickly wrote *May 20* on a piece of paper. “First of all, why did they murder He Zhongyi? Was it planned, or did they just kill him on the spur of the moment?” He answered himself without waiting for anyone to catch up. “I think it was on the spur of the moment, because He Zhongyi asked about Chengguang Mansion’s location on the same night he was murdered.”

“How do you know?” Luo Wenzhou cut in.

“I ran into him at a café where he was making a delivery and happened to overhear him. Sorry—I didn’t mean to hide it, but I thought

that detail was unimportant at the time."

Luo Wenzhou just nodded. "Makes sense. If they planned to kill He Zhongyi that night, they would have told him the address specifically." Tao Ran had no idea why they were discussing this. He was about to speak when Luo Wenzhou gestured for him to wait. "We're doing a basic analysis of the killer's behavior."

"The security footage showed He Zhongyi taking a call, leaving Chengguang Mansion, and rushing to Wenchang Road, which suggests that someone asked to see him. At that point, the killer must've known that he was outside of Chengguang Mansion. But what'd they discuss on the phone?" Fei Du narrowed his eyes and tapped the pen against the table. "'I wasn't seen… The security cameras didn't catch me… I just want to say something to you…'"

"But for some reason, despite those reassurances, they still decided to kill He Zhongyi," said Luo Wenzhou. "If we follow our previous train of thought, if this was a spur-of-the-moment murder, then it's doubtful they had a murder weapon ready ahead of time. It's more likely that that dumbass Zhang Donglai took off his tie and threw it somewhere, and the killer spotted it by chance. In that split second, they had an ingenious idea. That leads us to our second question: Why did they bring the victim here to Wenchang Road?"

Tao Ran thought about that. "If Zhao Haochang was the killer, that's where he works. It's easier to commit murder in a familiar environment."

"Wenchang Road isn't the only environment he's familiar with, though. If the idea was to give himself a sense of security, wouldn't it have been better to kill He Zhongyi closer to home?" Luo Wenzhou crossed his

arms. He met Fei Du's eyes and noticed that they looked particularly cold—lifelessly icy. "What do you think, Fei Du?"

"'So, I've dug a hole and put a scapegoat in it. Now, of course, I need to get myself out…' He did it so he'd have an alibi," Fei Du declared.

Tao Ran wasn't Captain China, growing all the more robust the more he got hacked at. Nor was he a young night owl. It was after midnight by this point, and he was exhausted. His brain had been stuffed with a huge amount of information, and now it had the consistency of congee. "Slow down, slow down. How did you reach this conclusion about the alibi? We clearly saw He Zhongyi leave for Wenchang Road on the security cams."

Luo Wenzhou lit a cigarette. He turned around, took two deep drags, then reached out to try to waft the smoke out the door. "Tao Ran, did you forget?" he asked, his voice a little muddled. "We only got that security footage by 'accident.'"

In fact, Tao Ran *had* forgotten. He Zhongyi had carefully avoided all security cameras that night, but unfortunately, he'd underestimated how desperately the wealthy feared death. In addition to the visible cameras, a few more were hidden in the little alleyways surrounding Chengguang Mansion. The one that had caught him was up in a tree, disguised as a birdhouse.

That meant that neither he nor the killer knew about this moment that was recorded for posterity. Meanwhile it was only through that recording that the police had found the bus stop and determined where He Zhongyi went. Huashi's East Side was lousy with security cameras: municipal cameras, transportation cameras, cameras installed by businesses, private security cameras… There were too many to count, and the police couldn't

examine the footage from them all. If they hadn't already known which direction He Zhongyi had gone when he left the mansion, they never would've found this footage of him.

In other words, the killer had no reason to expect the police to discover that He Zhongyi had ended up on Wenchang Road.

"The killer could've made up an excuse—say, that he'd drunk too much—to hitch a ride back to the office with someone else," Fei Du explained. "From there, he could have easily found some pretext to summon one or more subordinates to the office—that's normal at a law firm. No one would've questioned it. He's a second-tier partner, so he must have his own office. While everyone else was busy, he could've snuck away, used the scapegoat's tie to kill He Zhongyi, hid the body, then returned to the office and pretended he'd just gone to the bathroom." Fei Du drew a complete circle on the paper. "That way, he'd have the perfect alibi: On the night of the crime, after leaving Chengguang Mansion, he returned to the office with someone and stayed there working the whole time. He never saw He Zhongyi. If you guys hadn't managed to trace He Zhongyi's route after he left Chengguang Mansion, that alibi would practically have been ironclad."

Luo Wenzhou caught on immediately. "He Zhongyi's body appeared on the West Side of Huashi, and the primary suspect, Zhang Donglai, was on the East Side. Then the killer pulled out his trump card—the tie—creating an 'ironclad' alibi. His next steps would be to get rid of He Zhongyi's mother, who could reveal his identity, and further mislead us into thinking that the murder happened in Huashi. That means he'll probably take He Zhongyi's mom to near where the murder took place!"

As he fell silent, Tao Ran already had his phone out to start contacting the officers searching for He Zhongyi's mom. "All departments, please focus your search in Huashi. West Side or East Side, Fei Du?"

Fei Du thought about it for a moment. "East Side."

"Why?" Luo Wenzhou asked, looking up.

"That would be way more eye-catching. It would force you guys to take Zhang Donglai back into custody. Also…I just have a feeling," Fei Du added lightly.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran stood at the same time.

Fei Du looked up at them calmly. "Can I come too?"

Chapter 19

WANG XIUJUAN WAS a forty-eight-year-old Hanwoman who'd been an elementary school dropout.Her son, He Zhongyi, had been the victim of the May 20 case, and her husband had died in an accident ten years earlier. She was seriously ill and barely able to work, so she lived off the sales of her small-batch handwoven baskets and the meager rental income from her plot of farmland, which spanned less than a third of an acre. Before she came to Yancheng, the farthest she'd ever traveled was to the hospital in the capital of her province.

The very first time she'd come to Yancheng, it was to say one last goodbye to her only son.

Beyond all that, there was nothing noteworthy about Wang Xiujuan. As for her emotions, or whether she had any hopes or dreams in her dreary life, there was no way to find out at this point.

"Keep investigating any suspicious vehicle that passes the municipal bureau. Can you locate her phone?"

"It was found in a trash can near the bureau, Sergeant Luo."

Luo Wenzhou picked up his walkie-talkie. He opened his mouth, then put the walkie-talkie down again. He didn't know what to say. Yancheng was huge, but other than the mysterious person who'd led He Zhongyi's mother away, only scammers and telemarketers would call her. She had no use for a cell phone anymore.

"Why?" he demanded, stomping rather violently on the gas. "What's the murderer's motive for this? How many backup plans can someone have

for a spur-of-the-moment murder? Seriously, Fei Du, I'm starting to doubt your hypothesis. Besides, if Zhao Haochang is the murderer, why did he dump the body on the West Side? If he wanted to frame Zhang Donglai, shouldn't he have dumped it on Chengguang Mansion's doorstep?"

There was no response.

Looking out of the corner of his eye, Luo Wenzhou realized that Fei Du was spacing out, staring unblinkingly at the road outside. He hadn't moved in a good while, aside from tapping out a four-four beat on his knee. Without preamble, Luo Wenzhou reached over and swatted him. "Hey. I'm talking to you!"

Fei Du didn't reply.

Never in his life had anyone dared to touch his precious head. And that wasn't just a touch; it was a *slap*! For a while, he didn't know how to respond. He turned to stare at this bold human, his gaze a bit chilling.

But Luo Wenzhou was a professional poop scooper, and Luo Yiguo stared at him with murderous eyes every day. Fei Du glaring daggers had no effect on him. "Is it possible that whoever dumped the body on the West Side isn't even the same person as He Zhongyi's murderer?"

Fei Du's brows twitched slightly, and just when Luo Wenzhou thought the young man was getting lost in a daze once again, Fei Du said laconically, "Yes."

"But which is more likely?" Luo Wenzhou pressed.

"That depends on what other evidence we have." Fei Du's terrible circadian rhythm had apparently finally fixed itself—he seemed a little

tired. He lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Just based on what I know, both possibilities are equally likely.”

“If they aren’t the same person, that opens too many possibilities,” Luo Wenzhou acknowledged. “Let’s forget that for now. If they are the same person, then why’d they dump the body on the West Side?”

Fei Du opened his eyes, his perfectly proportioned double eyelids hooding them. “As I told you before, I believe the murderer and He Zhongyi knew each other. You cops always investigate people the victim had ties to, so the murderer is at risk of getting caught. Some things might come to light while the police investigate possible motives—to be specific, things the murderer carefully hid. Why dump the body on the West Side? Think about it this way: If not for those people taking selfies and posting them on the internet, He Zhongyi might’ve never been found.”

Luo Wenzhou’s pupils constricted; he immediately understood. Without those selfie-takers, He Zhongyi’s death might have played out just like Chen Yuan’s—even if the public saw his body, nothing would’ve come of the investigation.

Fei Du continued, “In that case, if something had gone wrong—if the murderer’s first ‘firewall’ had failed and the body was found, triggering a police investigation—then he could create a second firewall: Zhang Donglai. Zhang Donglai had been involved in a conflict with the victim recently, the kind it would only take you guys a bit of simple questioning to find out about. As you grew more suspicious of him, you’d focus your attention on him and spend less time investigating He Zhongyi’s other connections. And because of the rather delicate issue of Zhang Donglai’s identity, things had the potential to get ugly quick, whether you investigated

him thoroughly or swept things under the rug for him. Navigating that would be more than enough to keep you all busy. Where would you have found time to figure out who else that rural farm boy knew?"

Luo Wenzhou fell silent. That was exactly what'd happened.

Fei Du shifted slightly, as though he'd been sitting for too long. He stared distractedly out the window at the passing scenery. The rows of streetlights gave the city's spiraling overpasses an elegant look, and even from a distance, the lights of Huashi's East Side shone brilliantly—the sparkling sign of a nightless city. Perhaps it was just Fei Du's eyes playing tricks on him, but the immense, wide LED Sky Screen of the East Side seemed brighter than normal.

Luo Wenzhou glanced at him, then suddenly asked, "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Fei Du asked, his face expressionless.

Luo Wenzhou hesitated, then asked point-blank, "Well, why are you talking to me so nicely?"

For a few moments, Fei Du was lost for words. "Sorry, Sergeant Luo," he said finally. "I didn't know you liked it rough."

The pair fell silent again, both realizing how wrong that sounded.

Do I not have anything better to do? Fei Du thought.

Luo Wenzhou took an extra second to recover. How dare that brat tease him—and in such a sarcastic tone!

Finally, Fei Du coughed, turned away, and changed the topic as if he had amnesia. He fixed his gaze on Huashi's approaching East Side. "The culprit lured He Zhongyi's mother from within the station itself. So, if we

assume they're acting alone, then I think they must have some criminal history."

"What kind of history?"

"One that hasn't been discovered. That kind of narcissistic, crazy arrogance could only come from getting away with a deeply buried crime."

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A LONG LINE OF POLICE CARS flooded the central business district, then promptly dispersed into different zones. They focused on the area around Chengguang Mansion, the main plaza, and the places He Zhongyi had made deliveries to.

"What the hell?" Lang Qiao's voice cracked out of the walkie-talkie, heavily distorted by electrical interference. "Fei-zong, you're there too, right? Are this many night owls normally out in your area? There are so many people in this plaza!"

Fei Du didn't know what was going on either. By this hour, it was usually quiet, apart from the bar alley toward the back and the private clubs. Even on weekends, it rarely got this busy.

"Wenzhou," Tao Ran said through the walkie-talkie, "the team we have on the security footage saw a suspicious car. There was a logo on it that seemed to be from a not-quite-legal private car rental business. They went to find the company, and they found out that its practices are extremely shady. The people there couldn't even confirm whether an ID they had on file didn't match up with the owner—"

“Whose ID did they have on file?”

“He Zhongyi’s.” Tao Ran sighed. “About fifteen minutes ago, that rental car drove into the central business district—”

Just then, some kind of commotion exploded all around, interrupting Tao Ran. He let out a sudden hiss.

Luo Wenzhou parked on the side of the road, took a look around, and saw that the Sky Screen had lit up with color. Then a huge countdown appeared onscreen: five minutes.

The Sky Screen was a massive LED display. Half of it was on a towering building. It spilled from the top down toward the ground like a blanket until it reached about the third floor. From that point, it flowed perpendicular to the ground, forming a long walkway with screens above and below. Everyone could see Sky Screen’s expansive canvas, whether they were in the middle of the plaza or one of the surrounding skyscrapers.

“I guess the convention center is doing a test run for the closing ceremonies, Boss,” someone on the other end of the walkie-talkie explained. “The best view is from the observation deck at the top of the Economy and Trade Center. Apparently, all the screens will live broadcast the same thing.”

“Whatever,” Luo Wenzhou said. “How’s the search going?”

“There’s nothing near Chengguang Mansion. We asked a bunch of security guards, and they all said they hadn’t seen anything. They won’t give us the security footage, though—they say it’s a private space, and if we want the footage, we need to give them the right paperwork. But there’s no time for that now!”

“There’s too many people in the plaza, Boss. Still, we’re going through and questioning all of them one by one.”

“Sergeant Luo, most of the cafés are closed. No one’s around. We’ll take another look around the victim’s usual route, though.”

“We haven’t been able to find that car, Sergeant. We’re widening the search area.”

Reports flooded into Luo Wenzhou’s ears simultaneously. In his mind, he quickly sorted them by priority, and he was just about to issue further instructions when he was interrupted by Fei Du’s sudden emergence from the car. Fei Du had a terrifying look in his eyes as he peered up at the countdown on the Sky Screen above their heads. It was now at four minutes and forty seconds.

Luo Wenzhou froze. “What is it?”

“Using suicide to draw attention to a situation is a surefire way to create a huge stir,” Fei Du said in a low voice. “It’s usually done in an iconic location or somewhere with huge amounts of people. With such a large audience, how would they ensure that everyone can see, but no one can stop it?”

Luo Wenzhou looked up. Row upon row, the tall buildings of the East Side’s central business district stretched toward the sky like trees in a forest. Staring up at them all from ground level was nearly dizzying. In the background of the countdown, fireworks were going off, shining a constant, splendid spotlight on their suffocatingly tight window of time.

“There are at least seven or eight skyscrapers here, and way more if we’re talking regular buildings…” Luo Wenzhou grabbed Fei Du’s

shoulders. “Which one would she be on?”

Seeing that Fei Du was as white as a sheet, Luo Wenzhou immediately realized that he’d asked a ridiculous question. Fei Du wasn’t a god.

He hastily grabbed his walkie-talkie and dashed toward the most eye-catching building—the Economy and Trade Center.

“Attention, all squads!” he yelled as he ran. “Comb all the rooftops! Now!”

Fei Du knew in his bones that something terrible would happen when the countdown reached its end. For a moment, he stood in place, utterly lost. Luo Wenzhou hadn’t even stopped to close the car door before he disappeared into the distance, but with less than five minutes, what could they do?

A woman’s face flickered suddenly before Fei Du’s eyes like a fleeting shadow. She was smiling with tears in her eyes. Slowly, gradually, the image stretched its hooks into the distant past, back to that lonely, luxurious mansion, all those summers ago…

The shrill screech of brakes snapped Fei Du out of his daze. The officers who’d originally been searching near Chengguang Mansion had arrived. Tao Ran sprinted over with another large group of people. Speaking into his walkie-talkie, he directed those around him to split up and search.

There were four minutes left. Three minutes, fifty-nine seconds.

Fei Du abruptly picked up his phone and dialed rapidly. “It’s me,” he said when the call connected. “Does the Economy and Trade Center own the Sky Screen? Get me their CEO—Li-zong. It’s urgent. Hurry!”

The bar alley was lit up as bright as day. Plenty of customers, having heard about the light show, were gathering in the plaza with multicolored cocktails, ready for a good time. They cheered and shouted, counting down with the screen. Meanwhile, the desperate police pushed through the crowds and ran from building to building under the dazzling lights. There was no time to wait for elevators; they had to race up emergency stairs. On each building's roof, they'd look around with their flashlights, find nothing, and barely catch their breaths before heading to the next structure…

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THE WOMAN STOOD SOMEWHERE high up. The person who'd brought her there had already left—or perhaps they were watching her somewhere. They'd seemed vaguely familiar to her, but she wasn't in the mood to figure out who they were. Still, that slight familiarity had comforted her.

It was summer, but in the deep of the night, the wind on the rooftop was cold nonetheless. The woman glanced down. From this angle, the constantly flashing LED screens made her head spin. *How much electricity does this all consume?* she thought idly. Back at home, she sat outside in her yard after dark to save on electricity. She washed up and brushed her teeth under the glow of the moon. She didn't turn the lights on unless she had to, and she'd never seen such an extravagant night view.

The woman glanced at the countdown on the large screen. One minute five seconds, one minute four…

With great difficulty, she bent over and picked up a huge sign. Her grievances over injustice were written on one side. On the other side were two sturdy ribbons that would allow her to wear the sign like a set of wings.

She didn't know whether the sign would survive such a high fall, so she'd also put her will in her pocket. That person had printed it for her. She only had a rough idea of what it said; she'd long since lost most of the reading and writing skills she'd learned as a child.

Soon, the minute count on the screen hit zero, and the seconds were flying by.

The woman gritted her teeth, put on her "wings of injustice," and climbed over the railing.

1:05

Chapter 20

FORTY-FIVE SECONDS WERE LEFT on the countdown. For a moment, the entire screen froze—and then, before everyone's eyes, up came a photo of a young man.

He was about eighteen or nineteen, his appearance unassuming. His skin was slightly tan. His posture as he faced the camera looked very wary, but despite that, his grin was bright and open; it revealed his pearly-white teeth.

When the woman on the rooftop was unexpectedly hit with that old, bright photo, she slowed down, one leg over the railing. The "wings" on her back blew noisily in the wind.

Everyone in the plaza below, waiting for the closing ceremonies rehearsal, saw the photo too.

Luo Wenzhou had just finished checking a building; he was running back outside when a slight glance indicated that things outside had changed. He stumbled, nearly rolling down the stairs that led to the building's entrance. Another officer gasped. "Don't broadcasting rights have to be purchased, Sergeant Luo? How can they change it at the last minute like this?"

"Shut up!" Not even stopping, he spoke into his walkie-talkie. "Come in, Team One. Did you guys find that car? Pay attention to all intersections. The second he shows up, arrest him. Give Fei Du the make and license plate number. Tell him to put them on the screen and encourage everyone to report the vehicle."

Meanwhile, employees were rushing around in the Economy and Trade Center's control room. "Is the camera connected?" one asked.

"What about the video processor?" said another.

"Lights, lights, lights… Hey, watch that wire!"

In the midst of all this chaos, Fei Du pushed down the urge to start pacing and forced himself to stay put in the corner. He tapped his leather shoes, which were now splattered with a bit of mud, rhythmically on the ground. It was as if, in his world, a song with a four-four beat played constantly, ready to block out the sounds surrounding Fei Du anytime.

Suddenly, a light turned on in front of him. Fei Du looked up.

"Fei-zong! All the equipment's ready!"

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THE WOMAN on the rooftop greedily drank in the photo of the young man, unaware of how much time had passed.

It was curious. His face was as ordinary as they came. If he'd been walking down the street, no one would've given him a second look. But to her, he was inexplicably adorable. His silly square chin was cute; his wide-set eyes were cute; his sparse eyebrows were cute; even the gap in his front teeth was cute. Even if she'd stared at him for a thousand years, she wouldn't have gotten enough of him.

But sadly, she couldn't do that—not anymore.

As soon as that thought struck her, memories started pouring in, slow but unrelenting. The light in her eyes was like a small rock outcrop gradually disappearing under the waves. The woman looked up, wiping her eyes. She remembered now: Zhongyi was gone.

She gritted her teeth, preparing to swing her other leg over the railing. She hoped that they could reunite on the other side.

Just then, the photo on the Sky Screen vanished. A video replaced it. The hastily chosen background—just a white wall—was illuminated from several different angles, so brightly that it was almost piercing. In the center of the screen was a young man in a black shirt. Perhaps because setup for the video had been rushed, the input and output dimensions were mismatched, stretching and distorting him slightly.

It was him. The young man she'd wanted to say goodbye to before she left, although she hadn't had the chance to.

"Hello, Auntie," said the young man onscreen, speaking into a microphone held loosely in his hand. "As of right now, I haven't received any news of you. To me, no news is good news. I want to try to talk to you this way. If you can hear me, please spare me a few minutes and listen to what I have to say."

Wang Xiujuan watched the screen nervously. She suddenly felt lost, as though she didn't know what to do. She nodded unconsciously, then realized the young man couldn't see her.

Simultaneously, down below, Luo Wenzhou crossed the plaza. Reports from his various teams were streaming constantly into his left ear, but he kept his right ear free, listening for any commotion around him. "Get a few people out here to maintain order in the plaza," he instructed,

multitasking. “If we don’t have enough hands, ask the security guards to help. Don’t let these bystanders affect her emotional state—”

Onscreen, Fei Du spoke again. “If my mother were still alive, Auntie, she’d be around your age.”

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou glanced up impulsively. Even as he looked, though, his footsteps didn’t falter; he shot through the plaza toward the next building. “Group Three, there are security cameras on the roofs of the roadside buildings. Get the footage; don’t waste time going up there. Tao Ran, make sure you keep the roads clear. Group Four, come with me to those twin towers. A few floors are under renovation—we’ll focus on those.”

Fei Du’s deep voice seemed to follow his every step. “…I could go home a little more often than He Zhongyi. After all, he had to work hard to pay for your treatment, and I was just a student with nothing else to do. Every weekend, my mother waited for me, a fresh bouquet in the vase by the door. She pushed herself to make all my favorite foods, and she cleaned my room and aired out my blanket. She didn’t like living with a maid, so she had to do all those things herself. Did you air out Zhongyi’s blanket for him too?”

A single sob escaped Wang Xiujuan, but it was quickly swallowed up by the wind. That wind gusted downward from the rooftop, blowing past Luo Wenzhou’s sweaty temples. As it passed his ear, it sounded like a sigh.

“But when I came home one day, full of anticipation, I just saw a bunch of withered stalks and leaves in that vase by the door. All the curtains were drawn shut, and there was a thick, heavy stench in the air. When I reached her room, trembling, what awaited me wasn’t a freshly aired

blanket—it was her corpse." Fei Du paused, looking up. "You told me a while ago that my mother must've waited for me to come home every day. But, actually, the officers who handled her case back then told me that she'd killed herself the night before I got home. I came home every week at the exact same time—she always knew when I would be there.

"I've always wanted to ask my mom something: 'What kind of mother would time her death so that she left her corpse for her child to discover?'" "Every day I thought about ways to please you and make you happy, ways to make more money for your treatment, ways to repay the person who'd lent me money for your surgery… I know I haven't collected enough money yet, but now I'm lying all alone in the morgue, unable to return home, and you're just going to leave me there? If you mothers are going to be so cruel, why pretend that you love us in the first place?"

Wang Xiujuan sobbed so hard that she couldn't catch her breath. She bent over, one leg still over the railing. Fei Du paused, then reached for the microphone again. He counted to five in his head.

At the same time, text in the corner of the screen listed details about the mysterious rental car. Wang Xiujuan had limited literacy, so she didn't immediately notice. Everyone waiting down below saw, however; they all picked up their cell phones and passed the information on to their friends.

Another report came in for Luo Wenzhou. "Sergeant Luo, the workers at those twin towers say they're fixing the building's electrical system over the weekend. The power's been out for over an hour."

Cold sweat beaded all over Luo Wenzhou's injured back, irritating the wounds and making them feel like fresh lashes. It was so painful, he was ready to divorce his back then and there. His spine could take his

organs and run off into the sunset. Looking up at the towering buildings, he gritted his teeth. “Let’s head up.”

Fei Du relaxed his tone, separating himself from He Zhongyi again. “The murderer hasn’t been caught yet, Auntie, and you don’t know what’s going on. If you continue like this, how will you explain things to He Zhongyi? Please, wherever you are right now, can you come down to the plaza? We’re all looking for you. Let’s search for the culprit together. After we catch him, you’ll still need to take He Zhongyi home. I want to spend more time with you too. Can you…can you give me another chance to pretend to see my mother again?”

Wang Xiujuan began to wail as if screaming her very soul out of her body. As her tears flowed out of her, so too did the courage to smash herself into the face of this city. She once again became the soft, weak woman who’d just arrived in Yancheng, uneasy and lost. When she tried to look down, her legs even went numb. She looked back up, but still couldn’t stand. She held the railing, trying to retract the leg that was already on the other side, but at that moment, something happened.

The railing that had seemed so sturdy was broken; it had really just been leaning there. When she tried to hold onto it, it gave way without any warning and swung outward. Losing her balance, Wang Xiujuan started to fall backward.

Her eyes widened, her mind going blank.

In that precarious instant, a figure flashed forward and grabbed the leg still stuck in the broken railing. The woman struggled fiercely out of instinct, and her tiny ankle nearly slid from the man’s hand.

The fresh stitches on Luo Wenzhou's back tore open as the full weight of a human body yanked his arms away from their sockets. Luo Wenzhou felt like he was being torn in two; he held on only through sheer willpower. "Don't move!" he roared at the woman.

It was a good thing he hadn't come up there on his own; the people hot on his heels threw themselves on him immediately. Three minutes later, this tangled mess of limbs finally pulled an unconscious Wang Xiujuan back to safety.

Luo Wenzhou usually felt like he could've gone three hundred rounds with Sun Wukong, but right now, he could barely stand upright. He stumbled back a few steps, then just fell heavily to the ground, not caring how he looked. He was gasping so hard for breath that he felt a little lightheaded.

"Sergeant Luo, she's still alive!" someone shouted.

All his tensed muscles relaxed at once. As they did so, he realized what a bloody, sweaty mess his back had become. It hurt so much, he couldn't stop gasps of pain. "Damn it. After this, my back's *really* going to be fucked up," he hissed.

Just then, Lang Qiao's voice came from the walkie-talkie. "Boss! A couple reported seeing the car in question inside Vista Park. The light inside was on, suggesting the murderer could be inside. They didn't dare approach!"

"Vista Park? Where's that?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

"About half a mile from the plaza. It's pretty empty at night. No one goes there except the occasional couple."

“No. There’s no way the culprit would be so far away.” Luo Wenzhou squeezed his eyes shut, bearing with the pain. “Grab the building’s renovation team and ask them to turn on the emergency power supply. Then switch all the cameras on. If there’s a blind spot, send someone to check it. This murderer sent a lawyer to find out the status of the investigation, then kidnapped someone directly from the station. There’s no way he’d be willing to lie low someplace empty when he hasn’t gotten the results he wants yet.”

Chapter 21

SKYSCRAPERS HAD COLD EXTERIORS, their straight, vertical facades utterly overpowering. The lobbies of those buildings were often covered in shiny wall-to-wall stone tiling, and the receptionist and security guards scrutinized everyone who entered. Every building had its own elevator setup, each with its own rules. Some could only be accessed with ID; some required you to get on or off on specific floors; some only stopped on even or odd floors. Skyscrapers had their own laws, and they often bewildered newcomers. Thus, many people felt unwelcome in these "countries" that seemed to hold visitors at arm's length.

But these twin towers were different. Even after several rounds of renovations, he still knew them like the back of his hand. He had interned here for six months, though he wasn't hired on full time when his internship ended; they wanted someone from a prestigious law school abroad, even if that person only understood a legal framework from Europe or the States.

He was a different man now. And these days, in-house legal teams, with all their pretty credentials, only looked over basic contracts. Faced with a case requiring specialist knowledge, they had to bring him back on as a consultant. In this towering building, the former intern Xiao-Zhao became Zhao-laoshi. But he still knew every hallway, every hidden corner of the stairwell inside out. Even during a power outage, he was confident that he could evade the cameras.

Everything had seemingly fallen into place for him tonight—but, unfortunately, his plans were still ruined. He'd disappeared into the crowd,

ready to watch a breathtaking performance on the Sky Screen. When Fei Du interrupted everything, he felt something he hadn't felt in a while: fury. He concluded almost immediately that that Fei guy was using the moment to pull off a despicable, tasteless stunt, whether for some business purpose or because he wanted to support his stupid friends. People like Fei Du wielded wealth and influence that were nearly unimaginable to him. They were talentless idiots who yawned and nodded off over the simplest due-diligence report, but as long as they pretended to draw a few obvious conclusions from the hard work of countless actual professionals, they were immediately praised as "young and talented."

When the police came to clear the crowds in the plaza, no one noticed a well-dressed gentleman disappear into the darkness. The cops were already there, and that stupid woman still hadn't jumped. He didn't know whether she'd gotten cold feet at the last moment or if that pretty face's cheap performance had fooled her. Either way, he had a plan B. Only one side of Tower A faced the plaza, and he'd tampered with the railing there so that even if she hesitated at the last moment, the loose railing would help her make the decision.

On paper, his plan was perfect. What went wrong?

He had to go take a look.

After some brief thought, he pulled a little trick. Instead of heading to Tower A, he went into Tower B, through the side door of a café. Totally familiar with the setting, he zipped up the emergency stairs meant for food and package deliveries, all the way to the eighth floor where the stairs led to a walkway between the towers.

There were security cameras at the walkway's entrances, but one side of the walkway had a plant wall. Behind that was a space just large enough for one person; it was shielded from the cameras.

Even though he knew that the towers had no electricity, so the security cameras were all just for show right now, he decided to be as careful as possible regardless. This blackout was truly a gift from fate.

He felt so smug as he walked quickly behind the plant wall that he didn't notice his movements creating a small breeze that shook the leaves on the plants. It was true that the plant wall covered him up, blocking the cameras' view. But he didn't notice that, after the leaves' slight movement, the previously dormant camera suddenly made a very small rotation.

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FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Luo Wenzhou came down with paramedics and put Wang Xiujuan into an ambulance. When he turned around again, he spotted Tao Ran and a few officers escorting a handsome man into a police car. That man, whom Luo Wenzhou had only met once, must've felt his gaze, because he looked back and glared daggers at him.

Luo Wenzhou put a cigarette between his lips, looking the captured man up and down.

"I just came to retrieve a document!" the man roared furiously. "How dare you arrest me? What evidence do you have? Do cops just start detaining any random innocent person when they can't solve a case? Let go,

you barbarians! If you wrinkle my clothes, you won't be able to afford to replace them!"

"Jeez. Aren't you ritzy," Luo Wenzhou said with his cigarette still in his mouth. "I'm terrified. Sounds like us poor peasants need to go borrow some money from Daddy Fei." He blew a kiss at the man as he was stuffed into the police car. "Bye-bye."

He hadn't even finished speaking when a hand reached out and plucked the cigarette from his lips. Lang Qiao's smudged makeup revealed dark circles around her eyes—she must've been running around for most of the night. They made it seem like there was nothing on her face except that enormous pair of eyeballs.

Lang Qiao threw the cigarette into the trash can a few steps away and pointed at the ambulance behind them. "You! Get in there!" she ordered her superior.

Luo Wenzhou stared at her.

Lang Qiao kept scolding him. "You've been out of line, you know! Hurry up and get in. And you'd better stay in the hospital and behave tomorrow. Don't come back here."

Luo Wenzhou sighed. "Dear daughter, you aren't even grown yet, and already you want to steal your father's throne?"

Smoke virtually poured out of Lang Qiao's ears. She jabbed a pointy finger at him. "You—"

"All right, enough," Luo Wenzhou interrupted her. "Do you know where Fei-zong went?"

Lang Qiao froze. She glanced automatically at the Sky Screen, which was now playing the actual video for the closing ceremony rehearsal. The brilliant lights were blinding, but compared to the real-life cop movie that had played out earlier, they were a little underwhelming. The crowd of bored spectators were glued to their phones, scrolling through social media.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him." Lang Qiao twisted her neck to look around. "Why are you…" When she turned back, Luo Wenzhou was already gone.

Luo Wenzhou grabbed a random jacket from one of the police cars, draping it over his shoulders to cover up the blood. He called Fei Du. The call went through but no one picked up, so he set off for the Economy and Trade Center at a quick pace. He tried the control room first, but all he found there was a bunch of employees enjoying a midnight snack. When he asked, they said Fei Du had already left. He asked the general direction Fei Du had gone in and set off after him immediately, calling him the whole way.

Finally, he heard the faint sound of Fei Du's ringtone—the song "You Raise Me Up"—from the back of the building. Luo Wenzhou followed the sound and discovered a little garden back there with a few stone tables and chairs, surrounded by shrubbery. If you looked up, one corner of the Sky Screen was visible, but no streetlights. Fei Du sat on one of the stone chairs, apparently not caring how dirty it might be. He leaned against the table with his phone set off to the side like a speaker.

Hanging up, Luo Wenzhou walked over. "I'm just a DJ playing songs for you, huh?"

Fei Du was too lazy to bother with him. His eyes were shut as if he were asleep. Luo Wenzhou sat down a few steps away from him, his upper body stiff. “Why didn’t you go see her?”

“Didn’t you guys save her?” Fei Du asked indolently.

“Yeah, but it was a close call. The culprit loosened the railing on the roof.”

Fei Du stopped tapping the table to the song’s beat and opened his eyes, meeting Luo Wenzhou’s gaze. Luo Wenzhou’s haggard face revealed his exhaustion. When he sat down, his back was unnaturally straight, and he seemed to move a little clumsily. Somehow, though, his eyes reflected two mysteriously sourceless lights. Those lights danced there, glowing gently rather than blazing. For just a moment, this familiar man seemed almost like a stranger to Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou had a good physique and a well-defined, handsome face. It was hard to tell his age; whether you’d said he was twenty or thirty, it would’ve been believable. But Fei Du had known him for years, and he knew that the sergeant hadn’t been like this in his early twenties. Back then, Luo Wenzhou was a true young master, all swagger, impudence, and wit. And because outward appearance reflected the inner self, his looks had always had a domineering yet silkily effete air. Now, he seemed more like an ancient, weathered stone statue. His rough, indistinct edges were time-worn into a smooth, clear outline, and while he’d once worn his soul on his sleeve, it had now settled somewhere deeper inside. From there, it looked out into the world with apparent gentleness.

Shifting a little, Luo Wenzhou asked, “Was what you said up there true?”

“Of course not,” Fei Du said, raising an eyebrow casually. “I was just blending my experience with hers to try to connect to her emotionally.”

For a moment, Luo Wenzhou hesitated. He didn’t have much experience speaking nicely to Fei Du. Somehow, albeit unintentionally, they always ended up reverting to the segment where they attacked each other. After a long pause, Luo Wenzhou still hadn’t figured out what to say, so as always, he fell back on thinking aloud.

“I looked into your dad back then.”

That wasn’t news. A woman had died silently in her home, and her only son insisted that it couldn’t have been suicide. Thus, just to be safe, they obviously had to look into other people in the victim’s life on top of searching for forensic evidence.

Fei Du gave Luo Wenzhou an impatient glance, warning him that he’d better say something useful.

“In the process, I learned about *another* group investigating him. When I brought them in for questioning, I found out they were a bunch of young men claiming to be private investigators. You were the one who hired them, weren’t you?”

His patience reaching its limit, Fei Du got up to leave.

“There was another time too,” Luo Wenzhou continued. “You were doing homework at Tao Ran’s place, and you left behind a few sheets of scrap paper. They had imprints on them, and when I traced over those imprints with a pencil, I realized they showed your father’s schedule. That was over two years after your mother had passed away. I wondered whether you’d been keeping an eye on your father all that time.” Indifferent to Fei

Du's attitude, he added quietly, "I always found the whole situation a little creepy. Then your father got into that accident…"

Fei Du stopped. Having reached Luo Wenzhou's side, he looked down, a sudden, cold smile on his lips and a hint of danger in his eyes. "And you suspect that it was me?"

Luo Wenzhou met his gaze, which always seemed slightly flirtatious. *The kid really is easy on the eyes,* he couldn't help thinking.

Bending down slightly, Fei Du set a finger against his own lips. "It could very well have been me, Sergeant Luo," he breathed. "Think about it. Whether he's dead or a vegetable, I'm the only heir to his massive fortune. As long as—"

Before Fei Du could finish, Luo Wenzhou put an end to this performance. He reached out, grabbed the young man's collar, and pulled him down. Then he smacked Fei Du on the forehead. His palm was way too warm; Fei Du felt like he'd been hit with a hot iron. Shocked, he retreated half a step.

"I'm talking to you nicely," Luo Wenzhou said. "Why are you being so annoying?"

Fei Du steadied himself and adjusted his collar furiously. *Who* was the annoying one here?!

"I don't think someone willing to bare himself like that in front of an audience to save a woman he doesn't even know is a dangerous person. I was going to apologize to you for my suspicions and for being prejudiced against you all these years."

Once again, Fei Du paused, but before he could call up that cold smile, he felt something pull on his collar without warning. At the same time, Luo Wenzhou collapsed forward, right into him. Fei Du felt as though he'd suddenly been enveloped in a flaming electric blanket. After a moment of shock, he pressed the back of his hand to Luo Wenzhou's forehead. It was scorching—almost hot enough to produce steam. He lifted a corner of Luo Wenzhou's jacket, then immediately had to turn away, nearly vomiting. Luo Wenzhou's back was covered in blood.

They stayed in that strange position for a while before Fei Du finally calmed his churning stomach. He stared at Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly, like Luo Wenzhou was a piece of meat he was deciding whether to braise or fry. Then, as if concluding that the meat's skin was too thick, and that it would be too old and tough to chew, Fei Du clicked his tongue contemptuously and bent down, his arms feinting this way and that. Not wanting to carry or hold Luo Wenzhou, he tried to pull him over his shoulder by his belt, but the guy was too heavy.

In the end, Fei Du threw Luo Wenzhou's unconscious body onto a stone chair, pulled out his phone, and—though it was running out of battery—called Tao Ran.

"Hello, one-ten?" he said impatiently. "I found this old man. He doesn't look like he's going to make it. How do I hand him over?"

Chapter 22

LUO WENZHOU LAY in his hospital bed, bored out of his skull. He was under heavy guard, given his history of jailbreaking. Through the door, he could just make out the sound of Tao Ran speaking to the doctor. After a while, the doctor left, the door creaked open, and someone walked in wearing soft-bottomed leather shoes.

Not even looking up, Luo Wenzhou began to recite his lines. "If I can't carry on, you need to…find someone nice to marry soon. Make sure you treat Luo Yiguo well after you're married. His life's been hard, since he's been motherless ever since he was a kitten…"

Tao Ran let out a series of harsh coughs as though he'd swallowed chicken feathers. It didn't sound quite right, so Luo Wenzhou quickly turned to look. Somehow, it wasn't just Tao Ran there; it was Deputy Lu, standing with his arms behind his back.

"I'd love to do that," Deputy Lu said kindly, "but as an old man, I think it's a bit too late for me!"

After a beat, Luo Wenzhou hurriedly sat up in the bed. "Deputy Lu."

Lu Youliang set his briefcase to one side and sat down, then stroked his buzz cut. "See this, you little brats?" he asked, pointing to his head. "Half my hair went white in a single night."

Luo Wenzhou, who was sitting, didn't make a noise; neither did Tao Ran, who stood.

"First thing this morning, I was called into a meeting with the higher-ups. Then I had to rush over to meet with Wang Hongliang." Lu Youliang

sighed. “That guy kept tugging my sleeves and crying, insisting that this was all his fault for not keeping an eye on his subordinates, that he had to take responsibility, and that we shouldn’t let him off easy. What bull…” An accomplished leader facing younger subordinates, Lu Youliang swallowed the curse. He shook his head gloomily. “Have Huang Jinglian and the others admitted to anything?”

“Two teams are taking turns questioning them,” Tao Ran said. “Let’s see how long they last. We also requested a warrant to look into Wang Hongliang’s personal assets, but given how things look so far, he’s probably moved them already. On the surface, everything seems okay.”

“We have to catch him, even if means going through everything. The evidence needs to be solid. And we have to do this completely by the book, or we won’t be able to explain ourselves.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart suddenly jumped. “Uncle Lu, what about Director General Zhang?” With something like this happening in the district bureau, Director General Zhang was technically the one at fault for not monitoring his subordinates; on top of that, Zhang Donglai was still a person of interest in another case.

Since the answer was obvious, Lu Youliang didn’t respond. Instead, he heaved a sigh and reached out to squeeze Luo Wenzhou’s shoulder, then turned to Tao Ran. “What about He Zhongyi’s case?” he asked. “What’s the connection between the two cases?”

Tao Ran wasn’t like Luo Wenzhou, daringly informal regardless of whom he was talking to. He was at least a little nervous in front of Deputy Lu, and subconsciously stood a little straighter in his spot by the wall. “Early this morning, we caught the suspect, Zhao Haochang, and found a

pair of gloves in his pocket that had traces of metal debris and paint on them. He must have been wearing them when he tampered with the safety rail on the roof of the twin towers. He's a sly one, though—he admitted to tampering with the railing, but only as a 'prank.' He wouldn't confess to anything else. He also claims that he has an alibi for the night of May twentieth."

"Don't you have concrete proof that the victim went to Wenchang Road that night?" Lu Youliang asked.

"The security camera only caught him getting off a bus there," Tao Ran replied. "After that, we lost track of him. And Zhao Haochang was at the office doing overtime the whole time, according to his coworkers. We can't pin the murder on him just because the victim passed his office. Also, Zhao Haochang doesn't know yet that we have that security footage. He's a lawyer; he doesn't specialize in criminal law, granted, but he's smart. If we told him about the footage, he'd probably realize that it's our only trump card. Then we'd be in a tight spot."

Luo Wenzhou chuckled bitterly. Fei Du sure had a good read on that wolf in sheep's clothing; he'd even guessed the guy's alibi. "Can Wang Xiujuan identify him?"

"She said that the person who took her away that night wore sunglasses, a mask, and a wig. He'd also changed clothes, so it'd be tough to identify him by appearance." Tao Ran paused. "We showed her Zhao Haochang's picture, and she didn't seem to recognize him. The situation with the car-rental company is similar; we found the wig and jacket in the abandoned rental car, but we couldn't get any prints. The suspect was very careful. What's our next step? Should we do a polygraph?"

"We can prepare one," Luo Wenzhou said, considering it, "but there's no rush. We're still not clear on something: What exactly is the connection between He Zhongyi's case and the case involving the district bureau?"

Before Tao Ran could respond, his phone vibrated twice. Lu Youliang and Luo Wenzhou both looked at him. Tao Ran glanced at his phone, then back up. "There's bad news, as well as a piece of evidence that may or may not be useful. The bad news is that the DNA results are back, and the blood on Zhang Donglai's tie does indeed belong to He Zhongyi."

Lu Youliang stood up, face serious.

"And the evidence?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

"Wang Xiujuan managed to identify Zhao Haochang from our photo. She said that he looks like a boy who lived in their village years ago—someone named Zhao Fengnian. He's just changed so much that she didn't recognize him at first."

Zhao Fengnian. *"Feng Nian-ge."*

Luo Wenzhou began to stand up, but halfway there, all the nerves in his back started to scream. Hissing in pain, he said, "S-someone told me that this almost certainly wasn't the killer's first crime. Figure out how and why Zhao Fengnian became Zhao Haochang. Focus on determining whether any unnatural deaths occurred around him that were never solved!"

"*Someone…?*" echoed Lu Youliang, furrowing his brow. "By the way, I heard that the owner of the Foundation for Justice and Courage car from yesterday purchased a five-minute broadcast slot on the Sky Screen, and it cost as much as the entire closing-ceremony rehearsal. He used it to

stop Wang Xiujuan from committing suicide? Do you guys know how much that cost?"

"He said it wasn't much," Tao Ran answered truthfully. "Less than his car."

Deputy Lu suddenly suspected that the few remaining dark hairs on his head were about to bleach themselves. "Your team…" The older man carefully weighed what he'd been told, then—feeling as though his blood pressure was skyrocketing—he asked carefully, "Do you guys completely understand this situation? Is he in a *personal relationship* with one of your female colleagues…? Why else would he spend so much money? Just for the sake of 'Justice and Courage'?"

Luo Wenzhou exchanged glances with Tao Ran. He didn't know what to say.

Lu Youliang thought carefully back to all the pretty young girls in the station. "Is it Xiao-Lang?" he asked hesitantly, but then shook his head, as if there was no way ditzy Lang Qiao could bag a hot CEO.

Noticing again that Luo Wenzhou kept avoiding his gaze, Lu Youliang suddenly remembered a rumor he'd heard about why the sergeant had remained girlfriend-less to this day.

He pointed at Luo Wenzhou, glaring. "Did *you* catch his eye?"

"I'm innocent!" Luo Wenzhou protested immediately. "Truly innocent! If I tried to spend even a day with that asshole, I'd die of anger at least eight times! I have absolutely no connection to him."

Lu Youliang's blood pressure spiked to 180. He never thought Luo Wenzhou would be so shameless. He continued to point speechlessly at Luo

Wenzhou for a moment, then walked away in a huff.

Tao Ran saw off their furious, elderly boss, then he returned to the room…only to find Luo Wenzhou smoking sneakily out the open window. "Okay, where'd you get that?"

"From Old Man Lu's pocket," Luo Wenzhou replied. "Hey, do you have my back or not? I need to run again. Can you cover for me?"

Tao Ran's temples throbbed. "What're you planning?"

"Chen Yuan—the sister of that kid who drove the unlicensed taxi—died under suspicious circumstances. Half a month before her death, she called a girl she hadn't spoken to in a long time. I always thought that was strange. I need to go find out more."

"You have to go *today*?" Tao Ran asked, exasperated.

Luo Wenzhou flicked ash from his cigarette. "The sooner the better. There's too much pressure on us right now."

Tao Ran surveyed his boss's unkempt state and thought better of his impulse to nag; it would be a waste of his time. He could only give in. "All right, fine. What's her name? What does she do?"

"Her name's Cui Ying. She's a second-year graduate student at West Yancheng University of Political Science and Law."

Tao Ran froze. "West Yancheng? Did Chen Yuan go there too?"

"Why?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

"That's where Zhao Haochang graduated from!" Tao Ran blurted out. "Last year, I think, his mentor invited him back to help out thanks to his real-life experience!"

Luo Wenzhou put out his cigarette on the windowsill. “Fuck. Let’s go!”

***

MEANWHILE, in a different hospital room, Lang Qiao listened unblinkingly to He Zhongyi’s mother, Wang Xiujuan. Fei Du sat to the side, wearing a pair of disposable gloves while he peeled an apple. He shouldn’t have been there, but Wang Xiujuan had suffered a huge shock after failing to take her own life, and when she woke up, her mood was still unstable. She essentially became an elderly “child” who needed a “guardian” present in order to form full sentences. Fei Du had become that temporary guardian.

“Did He Zhongyi ever mention meeting Zhao Fengnian in Yancheng?” Lang Qiao asked in a soft voice.

Wang Xiujuan shook her head timidly.

“Do you remember anything about Zhao Fengnian? You didn’t recognize him at first; was that because he hadn’t returned to the village in a long time?”

He Zhongyi’s mother glanced at Fei Du, who smiled at her encouragingly as he cut the peeled apple into small chunks. When he was finished, he put the chunks on a paper plate, poked a couple of toothpicks into them, and set the plate between the women. “The weather’s been dry lately,” he said. “Here—replenish some vitamins.”

“He doesn’t have anything to return to,” Wang Xiujuan said slowly. Her voice was a bit hoarse. “His family’s gone. As a kid, he had a disabled

father and a mute mother. They had three other children besides him—two girls and a boy. Things were hard for their family. When they managed to scrape together enough to send a kid to university, everyone said their bad luck was about to end. Then, one winter, a village idiot got locked out for a night. He had nowhere to go, so he wandered around and eventually tried to keep warm by lighting a fire. He ended up accidentally setting a big tree in the Zhaos' yard ablaze. The wind was fierce and howling that night. Nobody else noticed the flames, because everyone was sound asleep. The guy who'd started it didn't understand what was going on and didn't know to scream for help. The tree cracked and fell over in the fire, crushing the house. That entire family… Fengnian, their oldest, was the only one who survived, because he wasn't home. All the rest of them died. It was such a terrible tragedy."

The only time Lang Qiao had ever left the city was when her school organized a "farm learning experience" field trip. She didn't understand what she was hearing. "You're saying…a tree in the Zhaos' yard caught on fire? Then it fell over, and they all burned to death? Did they all live in the same room?"

"Their house wasn't very good," Wang Xiujuan explained softly. "Our village is rather poor. I remember…it was only after I had Zhongyi that it became popular to remodel with brick and tiles. The Zhaos had a lot of children, and the husband couldn't work. They could barely take care of all the kids. Where would they have gotten the money to rebuild their house? They'd always lived in that old hut. When it snowed, they had to clear the roof off immediately, or it'd cave in.

“When they finally managed to send their eldest to school, the entire family’s hopes were pinned on him. The couple was thrilled; they said their son had money now, since he was working in the city. The entire family relied on him: With his earnings, they could build a new house, and there was hope now for their two youngest children, who were both deaf and mute. At the time of the fire, they’d only just finished pulling down the side room. Without that room, their two daughters didn’t have anyplace to sleep except the floor of their parents’ room. When that burning tree fell, it knocked over the roof beam, and crushed the parents to death right there. The two daughters were young, and one’s leg got pinned underneath. The other was deaf and a little slow—she panicked, and the only thing she could think to do was to pull her sister free, so she didn’t make it out. The youngest wasn’t even two yet, so that was even more hopeless.”

Lang Qiao was frozen for a while; then she hurriedly took notes in her book. “So the fire happened just when they were renovating. Where was Zhao Haochang—um, Zhao Fengnian? In Yancheng?”

Wang Xiujuan mulled that over. “No. I remember him coming back specifically to help with the house… He wasn’t there that day, though. He’d gone to the county seat to see his teacher or something.” She sighed. “If only he’d been there. The entire rest of his family was either young, disabled, or both. With a strong young man there, things at least wouldn’t have ended that way.”

The harrowing story gave Lang Qiao goose bumps. It was terrifying even to think about. “After the accident, when did Zhao Haochang return home?”

Wang Xiujuan sighed again. “The roads around our village are rather rough. It takes a good few hours to get to the county seat and back. By the time he made it, the burned bodies had cooled and had been brought into the yard. Even the police were there. Terrible.”

“How did they know the ‘village idiot’ did it?”

“He was there at the time, holding a box of matches. And when the fire rescue team first arrived, he was still setting leaves on fire for fun, completely unbothered. They asked whether he was the one who’d done it, and he just laughed and nodded.”

“And how was the situation dealt with in the end?”

“How else? The arsonist was mentally disabled—he didn’t understand anything. What could they do with him? He didn’t have parents anymore, and his brother and family saw him as a burden. His sister-in-law went crying to anyone who would listen about how they were poor and couldn’t take responsibility for him. They said the authorities should take him away and give him the death penalty. The police came over from town,

but when they saw that he was disabled, they couldn't do much. They just took some photos and left."

"How could his family not be held responsible?" Lang Qiao blurted. "If a disabled person infringes on someone else's life or property, shouldn't the onus fall on their guardian to bear the consequences?"

Wang Xiujuan looked at her, confused and nervous. She didn't understand whatever heavenly edicts Lang Qiao was reciting. The two women stared at each other for a while before Lang Qiao abruptly realized how stupid her own question had been.

Lang Qiao felt so awkward she didn't know how to continue, but she was saved by Fei Du, who'd been silent up until that point. "Do you remember what kind of person Zhao Fengnian was?" he asked with impeccable timing. "Was he close with He Zhongyi?"

"Of course I remember. The Zhaos' eldest was the pride of the village. He Zhongyi and the other youngsters loved hanging around him. He was an older kid, and he didn't want to play with them at all, so he always found an excuse to make them leave. Still, those foolish kids always went on about 'Fengnian-ge this, Fengnian-ge that.'" Wang Xiujuan suddenly seemed to think of something, and the rims of her eyes reddened. Someone handed her a wet wipe, and she used it to wipe her face for a moment. "That Zhao kid had a good head on his shoulders. He rarely went out—he usually focused on his studies. Occasionally, he helped on his family's farm. He was the kind who'd always greet a familiar face, then have nothing else to say… He was a quiet child."

Fei Du nodded thoughtfully. "And this Zhao Fengnian never came back after that incident."

“No one knew where he went. I didn’t think he’d change his name in the city. I didn’t think he’d change so much…” Wang Xiujuan stopped suddenly, and her eyes slowly grew large, as if she were waking up from a dream. “Was he the one who drove me away from the city bureau yesterday? I… There’s no way I could have recognized him! Why…why didn’t he tell me? Has he got something to do with my son’s case?”

Fei Du sighed and leaned forward slightly. “That’s still under investigation,” he said in a very gentle tone. “Why did you leave with him then? What’d he say?”

“He said…he was someone who represented other people in lawsuits. He said he had a colleague whose last name was Liu, and that he was that rich person’s… Um… Well, it was that guy who came to the station last night.”

Fei Du helped her out. “Mr. Liu, the lawyer.”

“Yes, the lawyer. He said that Mr. Liu had proof of who the killer was, and his conscience wouldn’t let him sit on it, so he’d secretly visited the station to report it. But just having evidence wasn’t enough, because the culprit was someone important, and the police were too scared to deal with him. He said my son would never see justice… So I panicked. I asked what I should do. He said that in this society, if I wanted to tell people about this injustice, I’d have to be ready to go all out…”

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WHEN TAO RAN PICKED UP Lang Qiao's call, he wasacting as a chauffeur for Luo Wenzhou, who was notabout to be stopped by a minor injury. They were on their way to West Yancheng University.

"I got someone to look into it," Lang Qiao told them; Tao Ran had put her on speaker. "When Zhao Haochang first graduated, he barely had rent money, so he lived on the West Side of Huashi for half a year. That's probably why he knew the area so well. Also, Mr. Liu confirmed that Zhao was very interested in Zhang Donglai's case. He asked about it even more than Zhang Ting while Zhang Donglai was still in custody. And Mr. Liu was adamant that—since this tie could affect his entire career—he hasn't breathed a word about it to anyone other than the police, not even his wife. So there's no way Zhao Haochang could know that he found it."

Luo Wenzhou interrupted her. "Zhao Haochang could just say that the rich would all act like that, or that he made things up to mislead Wang Xiujuan. And although he told her to 'go all out,' that didn't necessarily mean taking her own life; he might say he was just telling her that she needed to make her injustice known to a crowd. It's too ambiguous. Do we have more solid proof?"

"Not yet. The circumstances surrounding the deaths of Zhao Haochang's family are suspicious, though. If they'd befallen regular villagers, I could believe that nothing came of it, but Zhao Haochang was already practicing law at the time. Would he really have just have let it go? I think he's pretty good at manipulating public opinion."

"How about this: You go write a report quickly. Go through the necessary procedures and get the case file for the Zhao family from their

town's police." Luo Wenzhou thought for a moment. "Is that phone he bought He Zhongyi trackable?"

Lang Qiao sighed. "It's a smuggled import—untraceable."

"What about the hundred thousand yuan?" Luo Wenzhou pressed.

A slow drawl came from Lang Qiao's end. "In complicated mergers and acquisitions, a *reliable* legal advisor often earns money under the table. Sometimes it's just straight cash. You won't find anything."

That was a clearly objective statement, Luo Wenzhou noted, so why had it sounded like such a jibe coming out of Fei Du's mouth? "And what's your professional opinion, Fei-zong?"

It was silent for a while on the other end of the phone. Then, just as Luo Wenzhou was starting to suspect that Fei Du just popped up to chime in, then left—totally something he would do—Fei Du finally responded. "I called Zhang Donglai this morning and asked him whether he remembered where his tie went. He didn't even know he'd lost it. It took him a long time to figure it out. He said, before visiting Chengguang Mansion on the twentieth, he'd gone to work during the day. Then he changed for the evening at the office, so he left everything there. A tie is too big to stuff into your pants pocket. If he lost it when he changed, then our guesswork before might've been wrong. When Zhao Haochang took it, he probably didn't realize that He Zhongyi was waiting outside for him. Nor would he have been aware that he would use the tie to kill someone. So why'd he take it?"

"You're saying that he stole it just to steal it?"

"With his income, he probably wouldn't stoop to stealing something so small for a practical reason," Fei Du reasoned. "It might be more for a keepsake."

“Zhang Donglai’s tie was a *keepsake*…?” Goosebumps erupted all over Luo Wenzhou’s body. “What’s his problem?”

“If I remember correctly, this was the first time Zhang Donglai brought his future brother-in-law to a social spot like Chengguang Mansion,” Fei Du said. “I spoke to He Zhongyi’s mom just now, and I get the sense that Zhao Fengnian has a closed-off personality and doesn’t like to display his emotions. If he has no way to release those emotions, then maybe he has his own special way to remember things. Do you guys want to look into this?”

“Er-Lang,[16] did you catch that? Request a warrant to search Zhao Haochang’s house,” Luo Wenzhou told Lang Qiao. When he heard her answer on the other end, he hung up and turned to Tao Ran. “Zhao Fengnian’s entire family was killed by someone intellectually disabled, and Zhang Donglai—who supposedly killed Zhao Fengnian’s fellow villager—isn’t much better. What a pity that the young, capable Mr. Zhao is always suffering at the hands of stupid people.”

Tao Ran’s lips twitched.

“Have you got a professional opinion to share, Deputy Tao?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

“No.” Tao Ran hesitated for a while. “No, it’s just…I had a sudden thought, but it’d be almost unbelievable.”

“Speak, Grand Chancellor. Your emperor will survive the shock.”

They stopped at a red light, and Tao Ran glanced at him. “Do you think someone else could have known who the culprit was before us?”

“No shit. Wouldn’t the murderer know that he’d killed someone?” Luo Wenzhou retorted. “Or would he have to wait for the police to rubber-stamp it and give him a certificate of authenticity?”

“Someone aside from the culprit,” Tao Ran pressed.

Luo Wenzhou blinked. “Tao Ran, what’re you trying to say?”

The light turned green, and the driver behind them honked impatiently. Tao Ran pursed his lips, turned back to the road, and stepped on the pedal.

“Nothing,” he said. “Never mind. I’m just speaking nonsense. West Yancheng Law’s graduate school is up just ahead, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” Luo Wenzhou took out a file folder. “Let me try calling Cui Ying now.”

The file held Cui Ying’s photo and clearly listed the department she studied in, her phone number, and all her other info. Luo Wenzhou dialed the number. As it rang, he looked out the car window and watched a few young people walk out the back door of the graduate school building. One girl pulled her phone out of her bag, then seemed to hesitate at an unknown number.

Tao Ran glanced at those distant students, then down at the photo in the folder. Suddenly, he elbowed Luo Wenzhou. “Isn’t that the girl you’re looking for?”

The girl chose that moment to answer the call. At the same time, Luo Wenzhou heard a hesitant “Hello?” from his phone.

“It’s her.” Luo Wenzhou jumped out of the car immediately, calling, “Hey, Cui Ying! Over here, to your right!”

Seeing this hottie stop Cui Ying in the middle of the street, the girl's friends immediately started teasing her. Confusion was written all over Cui Ying's face when she turned around. Then her gaze fell on the police car. Her expression transformed immediately, as if she'd seen a ghost, and she turned to run away.

"What's going on?" Luo Wenzhou set off after her immediately, but that didn't stop him from taking a stab at Tao Ran. "Look—the moment that young lady laid eyes on you, she was scared away. It's over for you, Tao Ran. You'll be single forever."

Tao Ran ground his teeth. "It was *you*!"

Despite ribbing each other, the pair worked well together, one chasing Cui Ying while the other looped around to block her route. As they closed in on her, however, the girl suddenly ran out onto the busy street as if she no longer cared whether she lived or died. A taxi happened to be driving past, and the sharp sound of its honking abruptly filled the air. Tao Ran used his quick reflexes to grab the back of the girl's neck and pull her roughly back to the curb. The taxi—which had slammed on its brakes—just barely steered clear of her; the breeze it kicked up sent the girl's hair flying.

Although barely recovered from the shock, the taxi driver immediately rolled down the window and started cursing them out. Tao Ran could only apologize over and over, his breath still painfully stuck in his throat. Twenty minutes later, he and Luo Wenzhou led Cui Ying into a clean, bright café.

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"THIS IS ALL RIGHT, ISN'T IT?" asked Luo Wenzhou. "You picked the spot, and the street outside this full-length window is full of people. If you yelled, half the city would probably gather. You can even text your friends and let them know where you are. This is my badge number." He slapped his police badge on the table impatiently. "You can take a photo and upload it to Weibo—don't upload my entire ID, though. Either censor it, or put me through a nice beauty filter first."

Cui Ying didn't.

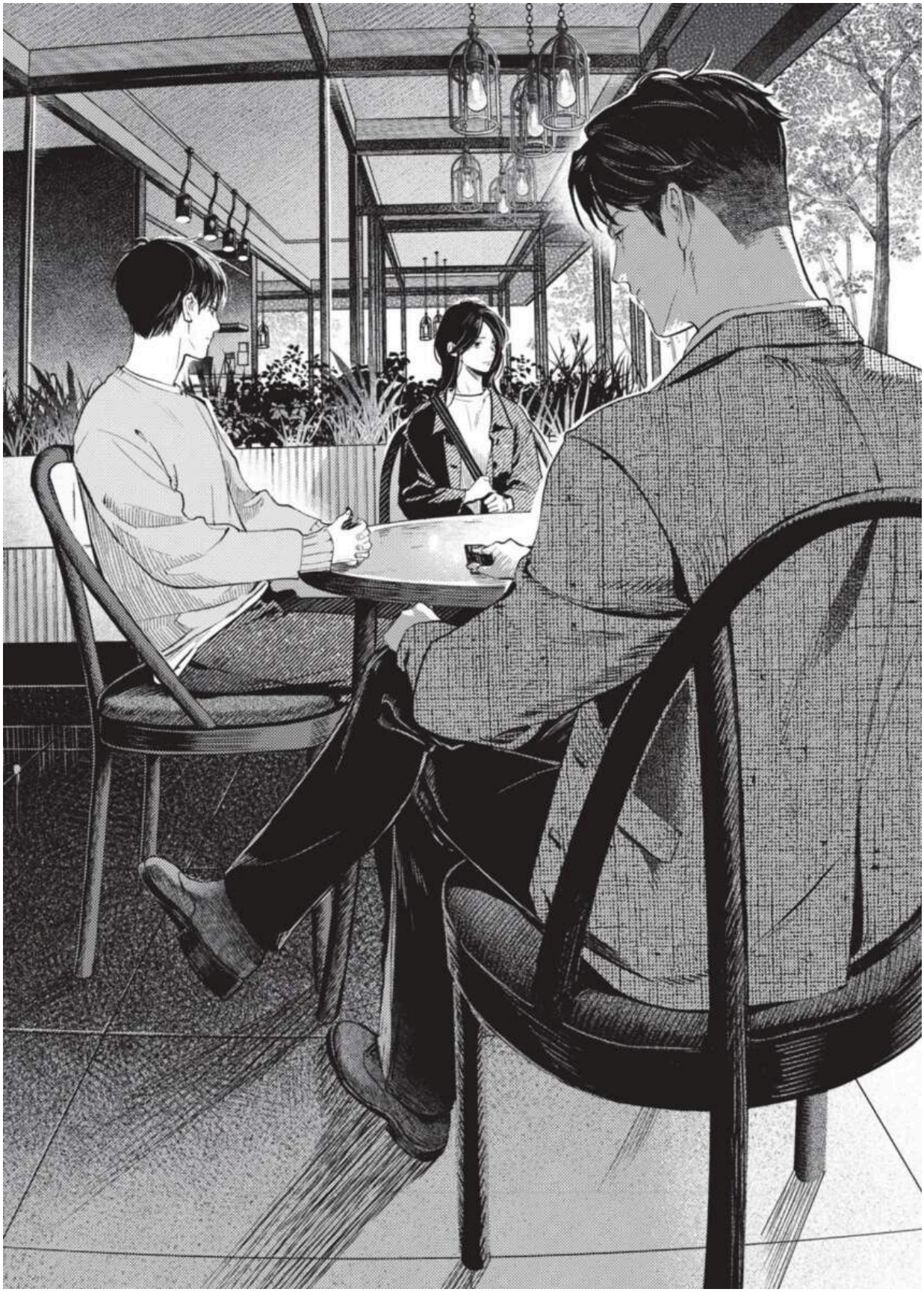
Tao Ran ordered a few drinks. He didn't want Cui Ying to be suspicious, so he asked the server to bring the beverages to their table directly, rather than touching them himself. When he came back to the table, he asked, "Why did you run?"

Cui Ying kept her head down, not answering.

"Were you afraid of the police car…or the police?" he asked gently. She still didn't reply, so he lowered his voice. "Maybe we have good news for you: The director of the Huashi District Bureau, Wang Hongliang, was arrested last night."

At that, Cui Ying froze; then, at last, she looked up hesitantly.

Luo Wenzhou rapped on the table. "Hey—can you be reasonable? Lady, take a good look with those thick glasses of yours—have you ever seen such handsome bad guys? Let me tell you, if I wanted to be rich and famous, I could get there with this face alone. Girls all around the world would be sobbing for the chance to call me 'oppa'[17] and shower me with money. Why would *I* risk everything to break the law?"



“Don’t listen to his nonsense,” said Tao Ran. “I don’t know how I can get you to trust us, Miss…”

“Was there also a guy named ‘Huang’-something?” Cui Ying asked suddenly in a small voice.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran exchanged a glance. So she *did* know something!

“Huang Jinglian,” Luo Wenzhou confirmed. He got down to business, pulling Huang Jinglian’s mug shot up on his phone. “Him. Right now, he’s suspected of abusing his power as an officer of the law, dealing drugs, murder, and other crimes. I caught him myself last night. I even got a glorious ‘ribbon’ on my back for my efforts.”

Cui Ying opened her mouth as if to say something, then snapped it shut again. She looked at Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran doubtfully, striving despite her naivete to determine whether the men were trustworthy.

She’d never left the ivory tower before. She couldn’t even tell whether Luo Wenzhou’s badge was real.

More slowly, Tao Ran asked, “Did you know Chen Zhen, Miss? He was Chen Yuan’s younger brother, and he died last night. We caught the killers, but we lack evidence, so we can’t do anything about their boss. Don’t you want them behind bars?”

Cui Ying bit her lip and hesitated for a while longer, struggling. Then she said, “I…I don’t know. I have to ask my teacher.”

“Why do you need to ask someone else?”

“Because…it’s…it’s with him.”

Tao Ran furrowed his brow. “What’s ‘with him’? Did Chen Yuan give you something?”

At that point, however, Luo Wenzhou gestured encouragingly at Cui Ying. “Please go ahead. You can call your teacher right now.”

Cui Ying pulled out her phone, found “Zhao-laoshi” in her contacts list, and pressed call. No one picked up, even after a second try. “He’s not picking up,” she said, shocked.

Of course he wasn’t. “Zhao-laoshi” had spent the night in time-out at the police station. Luo Wenzhou pulled out a little notebook, making a pretense of seriousness. “How about this? Give us your teacher’s contact information, and we’ll go talk to him.”

Cui Ying hesitated again.

“Two weeks before Chen Yuan died, she called you. If she told you anything, it would have been then. It’ll be easy to find out which of your teachers is surnamed ‘Zhao.’ We’re asking just to save time and trouble,” Luo Wenzhou told her. “I mean, you’ve already revealed a lot.”

Cui Ying panicked for a moment, then gave in. “His name is Zhao Haochang,” she said in a delicate voice. “He’s really our upperclassman, but he was asked to monitor our practical classes. He supervised me for three months. I can…I can give you his number.”

Luo Wenzhou studied her for a while, then said suddenly, “If I remember correctly, Chen Yuan didn’t pursue a higher degree after she graduated. She went out to find a job, so your teacher probably wouldn’t know her, right?”

Not realizing that he was still getting information from her, Cui Ying shook her head honestly. “He doesn’t.”

“Okay, I understand, then. She gave you something that was a matter of life and death because she was afraid that someone else would find it. Something that no one, not even her brother, knew about. But you thought it was too scary and didn’t know what to do with it, so you gave it to someone you trusted. Is that what happened?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

Cui Ying’s eyes shone, but she didn’t say anything.

“You have that high an opinion of him, huh? I bet this teacher’s pretty good-looking.”

The girl’s face immediately turned bright red.

If Luo Wenzhou told Cui Ying that Zhao Haochang had already been captured, how would she react? On one side was a police officer she didn’t trust; on the other was her secret crush. Luo Wenzhou let out a long sigh. *What do I do now? Seduce her?*

As he observed the trembling young woman, a thought suddenly flashed through his mind.

Chapter 23

CHEN YUAN MUST'VE KNOWN that none of her personal belongings were safe—that even her family would be monitored. After all, when He Zhongyi's case unfolded in the West Side, Wang Hongliang had panicked and even sent someone to keep tabs on Chen Zhen, who knew nothing. Naturally, things would be worse for Chen Yuan, who was deeply involved.

She was a helpless girl. How had she escaped Wang Hongliang's net and contacted Cui Ying?

It wasn't clear yet whether Wang Hongliang and the others had looked deeply into Chen Yuan's contacts, but it didn't seem like they had their eyes on Cui Ying, at least for the moment. Why not? There were two possibilities: Either Wang Hongliang and his lackeys were stupid, or they thought they'd already found what they were seeking.

Somehow, Chen Yuan had managed to get something to Cui Ying. She'd died not long thereafter. At that point, Wang Hongliang and the others had kept relatively quiet and left Cui Ying alone. What did that mean?

Luo Wenzhou's gaze was slightly cold as he looked at the girl before him.

Again, there were two possibilities. One: This inexperienced young girl had ended up betraying Chen Yuan. Two: She'd panicked and confessed the whole thing to someone she trusted—Zhao Haochang—who in turn sold out Chen Yuan to Wang Hongliang.

Just then, Tao Ran received a call from the station. After listening silently for a while, he typed a message on his phone for Luo Wenzhou: *Wu*

Xuechun just finished giving her statement in the hospital. She accused Huang Jinglian and the others of protecting drug smugglers and receiving commissions from them. But she never saw Wang Hongliang, so she couldn't provide any testimony against him.

Luo Wenzhou's brow furrowed.

Tao Ran kept typing quickly. *Wu Xuechun said that people like Chen Yuan were called "fresh meat." In her words, she said: "There's someone above Huang Jinglian who never shows his face. He thinks all the girls at the Grand Luck are dirty, so he only plays with girls elsewhere. Whenever he met a girl who wasn't 'trainable,' he drugged her, and by the time he was done with her, she'd be in a terrible state. Then he'd dump her at the Grand Luck." One of Huang Jinglian's men likes to make videos, and with Wu Xuechun's information, we found a few videos on his computer. Most of them were of orgies involving drugs, and one had Chen Yuan in it. According to the forensics team, she was likely already dead when the video was taken.*

Luo Wenzhou gave Tao Ran a glance that asked whether Huang Jinglian had admitted to anything. Tao Ran shook his head. Luo Wenzhou spun his cigarette box silently in his hand, then said suddenly, "Tell them to send me that video."

His previous casual attitude was gone now, and the change seemed to scare Cui Ying. With her long hair, light makeup, and delicate glasses, she really did come off as a student. She had a habit of chewing on her straw, and when her large eyes peered at someone, her youthful innocence was apparent.

The naive girl was sitting here, nervously sipping on a drink. The girl who hadn't had the luxury of naivete was already dead.

"Have her take a look," Luo Wenzhou told Tao Ran, then suddenly got down to business, pushing their drinks to one side. "Cui Ying, I don't want to beat around the bush. I'll tell you right now that your teacher has been taken into custody."

Cui Ying's eyes widened. "Wha…?"

Tao Ran's phone vibrated; a video had been sent over. Luo Wenzhou took the phone from him, opened the video, and pushed it toward Cui Ying. The video was badly lit, but the depraved scene unfolding was clear. Screams rang out, one after another. The cameraperson had a very shaky hand, which rendered the footage dizzying.

A man emerged through a small door on unsteady feet and waved at the camera. "Look over here! This one looks like she won't last." He started giggling manically before he even finished speaking, laughing at a mysterious punchline—a classic sign of drug intoxication. Then he bent down and dragged a naked woman out from behind the door.

Cui Ying didn't know what kind of contraband film this was, and instinctively wanted to look away, but Luo Wenzhou had his eyes glued to her. "Zhao Haochang is suspected of murder, disposing of a body, kidnapping, and other crimes," he informed her.

Goosebumps erupted all over Cui Ying's wrist.

The video zoomed in, and the person filming giggled from behind the camera. "Let me film it. Let me film it, just for a sec."

The camera bobbed, taking in Chen Yuan's body and paying special attention to her face and private areas. Cui Ying covered her mouth. She looked as if she were about to throw up.

"Take a good look. That's how Chen Yuan died," Luo Wenzhou said coldly. Cui Ying jumped to her feet. "She trusted you with a very important secret, and you turned around and told everything to a scumbag. You're the reason she ended up like that!"

"N-no," Cui Ying whispered, shaking her head.

Luo Wenzhou showed her no mercy. "But if he didn't betray Chen Yuan, did *you*? Can you explain why she died just a few days after she called you?"

Tao Ran slid quietly into his usual good-cop role. "Don't scare her. Miss, Chen Yuan died unexpectedly less than two weeks after contacting you for the last time. My partner is telling you the truth. Were you two close?"

Cui Ying dropped heavily back into her seat. "You guys are lying. Zhao-laoshi isn't that kind of person…"

"What kind of person is he?" Tao Ran asked softly.

"Very mature and calm… H-he said there's nothing new under the sun. He wasn't shocked at all. He said the strong preying on the weak was just a fact of life, and that those lucky enough to become carnivores feast on their prey without mercy… That only tigers and leopards can hunt jackals and wolves. And rabbits can only wait—or become predators themselves." Cui Ying sobbed. "He said cops were all trash. There's no way he could be one of them."

The words had already left her mouth when she remembered that the pair in front of her were police officers. She shut her mouth quickly and stopped talking. Only her sobs could be heard.

"Do you trust us?" Tao Ran asked her. Cui Ying twisted the hem of her shirt tight.

"Your Zhao-laoshi is already a tiger," Luo Wenzhou told her icily. "Did you see the news about an unsuccessful suicide attempt on Huashi's East Side last night?"

"Zhao Haochang killed someone and threw his body in the Golden Triangle lot," Tao Ran added. "Judging from your reaction, I'm guessing you know where that is?" When Cui Ying heard the words "Golden Triangle lot," she'd gasped, her entire body tensing up.

"What's the matter?" asked Tao Ran.

"He…he'd joked that if I ever killed anyone, I should carefully avoid the police, then dump the body at their meeting location. He said those scumbags would be too scared to investigate…"

"Cui Ying, what did you show Zhao Haochang?" Luo Wenzhou asked, his voice low.

"A video," she replied, seemingly dazed. "Just a video." Then she gritted her teeth and pulled out a red string she'd hung around her neck.

On it was a chicken-bone-shaped amulet, and Cui Ying split the little bone in half to reveal a thumb drive.

***

WHILE LUO WENZHOU marveled that this dumb childhad kept something like that on her person, Lang Qiaoand her team arrived at Zhao Haochang's residence.

Zhao Haochang's condo was fastidiously clean; its interior design and decor leaned toward a Western style. It had huge floor-to-ceiling windows and a wine cabinet, and it was located in a skyscraper in an expensive part of town. From that vantage point, even the mountains looked small. On first glance, there wasn't anything unusual about the place. It was a classic example of an urban upper-middle-class home.

The investigators looked through everything and finally confirmed that there were no secret passageways or safes to be found. The place was so clean, it could've been an unoccupied hotel room. Lang Qiao stood in the middle of the well-lit living room, one hand planted on her hip as she dialed Luo Wenzhou.

"There's nothing," she reported. "We looked through the cabinets, the wardrobe, and even under the bed. This is normal commercial housing. When the developers finished this building, it had hundreds of units that looked just like this. There's no way they'd have built a secret room just for him. The place is only about a thousand square feet, and we went over every inch with a fine-tooth comb. Unless he has an Anywhere Door,[18] his place hasn't got any hiding spots. We also checked to see whether he had any other property under his name, and he didn't, Boss. But if it's like Fei-zong said, why would he hide such disturbing things on someone else's property?"

For a moment, Luo Wenzhou was lost in thought.

“Oh, right,” Lang Qiao added. “We got the case file on the fire that killed his family. It wasn’t very useful. It’s been too long, and all the villagers said that intellectually disabled guy did it. The local station didn’t investigate very thoroughly, so all that’s in the file is a few photos of the crime scene and the supposed culprit.” The man in the photo indeed looked as though he had a few screws loose. He wore a ragged cotton coat with only one sleeve protector, and it was filthy.

“Hold on,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Accept my video call.”

Lang Qiao quickly did so. Through the call, she saw a computer screen with the entire Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau criminal investigation team plus Deputy Lu crowded around it. A video was playing onscreen, one filmed with a pinhole camera. At first, it was pointed toward a dark, murky background. Then a shrill scream rang out, and a young girl fell into view, her hair in disarray. Her gaze was unfocused, her face white as a sheet. She reached out an arm desperately, as though she was both yearning for something and trying to refuse it.

Out of frame, someone said, “Enough. Give it to her.”

The camera slowly panned over and caught the speaker: Wang Hongliang! And Huang Jinglian was next to him, bending down to murmur something to him!

Gasps could be heard throughout the bureau’s office. Deputy Lu slammed the table. “He can’t get away now!”

The camera pointed back to the haggard woman. It seemed like the person filming had taken a few steps forward. A tray flashed before the camera, and a pair of hands grabbed a syringe from it. The restless woman got her fix, and she twitched for a while, then let out a long breath. At last,

she relaxed, revealing the beautiful, clean lines her face could possess. She leaned against a small bed, unmoving, her pupils wide and unfocused as she stared at the person filming. She seemed to smile a little.

Suddenly, the camera shook. The person filming had evidently been pushed. Huang Jinglian walked into the frame and said, “Leave. You’re in the way here.” He shoved the camera person again, this time toward the door, and only then could the camera focus on the room once again.

Wang Hongliang had lit a cigarette; smoking, he walked over to the semiconscious woman and caressed her shoulder lasciviously. Then he looked up with a wry smile. “Once you get used to girls like this,” he said toward the camera, “they’re like eating rice slurry every day. Joyless.”

The cameraperson stumbled back a few steps, and the door closed with a bang. At that point, the video ended.

“It’s been confirmed that the woman who they shot up has died of a drug overdose,” Luo Wenzhou said, lighting a cigarette. “Her case is identical to Chen Yuan’s. In fact, Chen Yuan probably filmed this, not long before she became a statistic in exactly the same way. It’s almost like she filmed the end of her own life.

“Chen Yuan was often working while she studied—she needed money to help out her family—so she missed a number of classes. She graduated with very average grades and failed to pass the bar, so given her family’s financial situation, she couldn’t continue her education. After that, she tried her luck at law firms, but she lacked relevant experience, so none of the jobs she found were ideal. Then, to lessen the burden on her family quickly, she found a sales job with a high salary and a relatively flexible

schedule. She figured she could try to pass the bar again the following year and do the sales job in the meantime.

"The company she was at sold all kinds of bootlegged foreign booze. The Grand Luck was one of their main customers. Chen Yuan met Huang Jinglian and the others when she went to the Grand Luck to do a sales pitch. She stood out, and Huang Jinglian took a liking to her. He tricked her into drinking a spiked beverage. That's how Chen Yuan became some of the 'fresh meat' Wu Xuechun mentioned."

"A university student who'd received a proper legal education." Deputy Lu sighed.

"Chen Yuan wanted to commit suicide, but when she really tried to do it, she just wasn't able to. She couldn't make her peace with it," Luo Wenzhou said slowly. "Now, the last words Chen Yuan left for her friend Cui Ying… She used her company's online store and placed an order in Cui Ying's name, stuffed all the evidence she'd collected into some packaging for red wine, and sent that order to her. The evidence included this video, the names of a few meet-up spots, secret codes, and a letter. 'No one can save me, but I must make things right for myself.' That's the letter's first line. That's everything that Cui Ying knows. Beyond that…" Luo Wenzhou turned his cell phone around. "Lang Qiao? Are you still listening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Cui Ying attempted to tell Zhao Haochang about this, and halfway through, Zhao Haochang interrupted her and told her not to tell him over the phone. He met up with her at a winery a little way out of town instead. I asked around on my way to the bureau, and the owner of that winery rented

out a piece of collectively owned land to host a business club. At one point, he also illegally built and sold some houses with dubious property rights—"

"Give me the address," Lang Qiao demanded. Then, waving at the people around her, she ordered, "Follow me!"

***

THE SUN WAS HIGH IN THE SKY, and rows upon rows of grapevines seemed to wilt a little under the glare. The few flowers left on the pagoda tree hung limply, wilted. A row of minivillas had been quietly hidden in an inconspicuous corner of the vineyard; no landscaping had been done there, giving the properties a slightly rustic look.

A group of police officers pushed aside the trembling winery manager and opened the front door of one villa. Inside, they split up to search the premises.

"There's a basement here!" somebody declared.

Lang Qiao was the first one to shuffle sideways down the tiny, narrow staircase; as she did so, she could immediately smell a moisture absorber. At the bottom of the steps, she turned on the light, looked around, and was shocked by what she saw.

Chapter 24

WHEN LUO WENZHOU picked up Lang Qiao's call,he didn't say anything. Instead, he walked to the doorwith a cigarette between his lips and his mind laden with thoughts. Two cases, and a week of nonstop work. At this point, he had a pretty good idea of what'd happened. He even had convincing evidence. But for some reason, he also just had more and more questions.

"What are you thinking?" Tao Ran asked, walking over to join him.

Not wanting to say too much, Luo Wenzhou just came up with a random answer. "Fei Du."

"Huh?" Tao Ran responded, confused.

Before Luo Wenzhou could open his mouth again, someone off to one side interrupted them. "You were thinking of me? How rare. Sergeant Luo, to what do I owe that generosity?"

Unlike Officer Tao, who'd spent the whole night working, and Sergeant Luo, who'd just snuck out of a hospital, Fei-zong's attire made him look like he was attending some award ceremony. He'd changed his clothes, and as usual, they carefully straddled serious and casual, chaste and seductive. His long hair was tousled yet tamed in just the right spots, nothing actually out of place. He even wore those elegant but unnecessary gold-rimmed glasses of his, and he'd put on cologne to boot.

The previous night, Fei Du had pulled an all-nighter of his own to find Wang Xiujuan. Then, bright and early in the morning, he'd apparently gone to the hospital to help Wang Xiujuan write down her statement. It was

unclear just how he'd managed to borrow a short stretch from a different time zone to dress up. Despite Luo Wenzhou's confidence in his status as the hottest man in the world, the current and drastic disparity in his and Fei Du's appearances meant that even he wanted to kick this obnoxious peacock's ass—especially considering the way the peacock was staring at him through his glasses. He was definitely up to no good.

Luo Wenzhou cleared his throat, forcing himself to switch from the indignant urge to cuss up a storm to an utterly Zen and totally accepting attitude. Adopting a serious tone, he told Fei Du, "My team discovered a secret residence owned by Zhao Haochang. They found some stuff in the basement, and it's pretty much exactly as you predicted. I really do think you're incredible, Fei-zong. I'd expect no less of a professional creep with twenty years' experience."

"I'm feeling pretty awkward after hearing *that*," Tao Ran said from Luo Wenzhou's side. "Can you guys sympathize?"

Having been called out, Luo Wenzhou stuffed his hands huffily into his pockets. "How come you're back?" he asked Fei Du. "Did your company shut down?"

"I'm here to ask how the investigation is going on behalf of He Zhongyi's mother." Fei Du tapped his watch. "Also—since you're already going senile—let me remind you: It's six o'clock on a Saturday night. Not currently working hours."

Luo Wenzhou had no response.

"Ge," Fei Du said, turning to Tao Ran, "even if you're doing overtime willingly, your colleagues should show gratitude for your hard work. That's basic courtesy, isn't it? Bosses who pay no attention to when

the workday ends and think weekends are fair game are total trash. The only thing worse would be to forget to give you your paycheck. Thank god he's not doing your payroll."

A fire was raging, and unfortunately, Tao Ran was a fish in the only body of water around. Patting himself to put out the fires of battle, Tao Fish eventually suggested, "Let's talk about what Lang Qiao discovered."

***

LANG QIAO STOOD on the stairs, her skin crawling. She rubbed her face forcefully with dirty hands—an action that was almost unheard of for her.

This basement was laid out like an old library. There were several rows of large floor-to-ceiling wooden cabinets, each filled with little boxes. In each box was a glass jar, and inside were displayed…all kinds of things. A label hung beneath each denoted the date and event it commemorated.

An indescribable icy, rotting scent wafted toward Lang Qiao. All her hair stood on end. For a second, she felt as though she was looking at jarred lab specimens. What really gave her goose bumps wasn't the cabinets, though. It was the floor lamp in the middle of the room.

The lamp was shaped like a tree, but its appearance was extremely unsettling—the base of the lamp looked as though the "tree" had cracked in the middle, and a lightbulb had been installed inside its hollow trunk. When the lamp was turned on, bright light spilled forth from where the trunk was

just barely still connected. Each of the bare tree branches held thin tubes of light. From a distance, it looked as though the tree was engulfed in flames.

The team went through the cubbies methodically, recording everything inside them. Zhao Haochang, they realized, was meticulous; everything was stored in strict chronological order, left to right. The earliest shelf was labeled "university." Based on the marked date, it was probably from the day when Zhao Haochang—Zhao Fengnian—had first taken the train out of H— Province for university. Attending university was worth remembering, but a normal person would just have kept their acceptance letter. Zhao Haochang, however, had his own way of doing things.

He'd saved a sausage.

When the police took it down, the packaging of the sausage—which had expired many years ago—was still perfectly intact.

That wasn't the only bizarre thing. There were plenty of other items on the shelves that they couldn't make heads or tails of. For example, during his university days, Zhao Haochang had saved a sock, a wristband, a thumb drive, and similar trinkets. The objects seemed to have no relation to the events described on the labels, bewildering the entire team.

A relatively nimble colleague of Lang Qiao's grabbed a ladder and climbed up to the earliest cubbies. As he took down each jar to record its contents and tagged date, he asked, "Xiao-Qiao-er, are you sure all this junk will be useful? This is just a small Kung Fu Tea cup labeled 'internship'… and what is this?" He paused, picking up another jar. After examining it for a while, he said, "It says 'freedom.' But it's a…rag?"

Lang Qiao glanced up. Her pupils constricted as she said, "Give it to me!"

Through her glove, she carefully accepted the jar, her heart lurching as she shivered in this damp, cold basement. The jar contained a dirty, greasy sleeve protector. The grease that had gotten on it all those years ago still picked up the light of the floor lamp, and beneath it, Lang Qiao made out the faint lines of the original floral pattern.

The scanned photos that the town police had sent over had shown the arsonist wearing a single sleeve protector!

When the police arrived on the scene all those years ago, they'd immediately apprehended that suspect and taken that photo. According to Wang Xiujuan, Zhao Haochang had been notified only after the accident had occurred; at that point, he'd rushed back home. By the time he arrived, the police had already cleaned up the aftermath of the fire. Everything was already over.

But the sleeve protector belonging to the "village idiot" was here, in Zhao Haochang's possession. That meant that before the police arrived, Zhao Haochang had to be home to come into contact with the person who'd set the fire and get one of the guy's sleeve protectors… Then he watched as the fire swallowed his family alive, pretending to rush back from the county seat several hours later!

"Xiao-Lang," someone called from over at the farthest-right cabinet. "Come take a look at this!"

***

BY SATURDAY EVENING, Zhao Haochang had spent a difficult day and night at the station. He'd been up all night and now had enough stubble and oil on his face to ruin even the most beautiful visage. Despite his rather haggard look, however, he continued to sit still, expressionless. When he saw Luo Wenzhou walk in with a file folder, Zhao Haochang even raised his chin a bit proudly.

"Hello, Mr. Zhao. I'll start by briefly going over two things. One: Twenty-four hours haven't yet passed, so you and I can still have a little chat. Two: No one's preventing you from getting a lawyer, no one's forcing you to say anything, and no one's torturing you, right? And of course, if you try to claim that the cafeteria here harmed your appetite, you'll unfortunately be out of luck; we really don't have the budget for takeout. Do you object to any of that, Mr. Zhao?"

Luo Wenzhou hadn't even sat down yet, and he'd already sabotaged Zhao Haochang's opening monologue. The corner of one of Zhao Haochang's eyes twitched; Luo Wenzhou's attitude seemed to have angered him.

"Sorry—you look kind of familiar, but I don't remember you," Zhao Haochang said with deliberate disrespect. "How should I address you?"

He didn't manage to get Luo Wenzhou's goat. In fact, Luo Wenzhou burst into laughter. After sitting down, he lazily shifted and answered indifferently, "Me? You look so smart—why don't you take a guess?"

Zhao Haochang had been sitting for too long. He felt stiff all over, and that discomfort affected what should've been an easy, icy smirk; his

lips curled slightly unnaturally instead. “Is that necessary? I don’t think we’ll need to get too familiar with each other.”

Luo Wenzhou spun his pen around in his hand. “In the middle of the night, you snuck into the East Side’s twin towers, loosened Tower A’s railing, and nearly caused—”

Before he finished, Zhao Haochang cut in impatiently. “I already said that I didn’t know someone would happen to try to jump right then and there. If you’re accusing me of destroying municipal property and endangering the public, okay, I admit it. I’m sorry. I can write a self-criticism report,[19] or you can fine me. Not everyone’s salary comes from taxpayer money, Officer. Those of us who do actual work face a lot of pressure. Sometimes, to blow off some steam, we do things we’re not proud of. I’ve learned my lesson, all right? Please don’t make me repeat the exact same thing every time a new person comes in.”

Taking in this rant, Luo Wenzhou smiled. “I’ve done this for a few years now, and I’ve rarely seen a suspect as cool as you, Mr. Zhao.”

“Please weigh your words carefully, Officer Whatever-Your-Name-Is,” Zhao Haochang said in a frosty tone. “Why are you calling me a suspect?”

Luo Wenzhou stopped smiling and crossed his arms. “I’d like to ask you a few things, Mr. Zhao.”

Watching Luo Wenzhou’s body language, Zhao Haochang nodded “graciously” and gestured for him to go ahead.

“Now, that woman who nearly fell off the roof recognized you in a photo. She said that your name used to be Zhao Fengnian and you two both

came from the same place. Is that right?"

When Zhao Haochang heard the name "Zhao Fengnian," his breathing grew noticeably heavier. His pale face was as stony as a slab of rock, and he glared daggers at Luo Wenzhou, his gaze dripping with poison.

Luo Wenzhou remained unmoved, however. He glanced through the file calmly. "Following her testimony, we did a brief investigation on you. You were born in a relatively remote village near T— City in H— Province. You once went by the name Zhao Fengnian. Your parents, who were disabled, worked on their own farm. You had three younger siblings, and you had a hard upbringing." With each sentence, Zhao Haochang's expression grew colder.

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him. "You really didn't have it easy, Mr. Zhao. Your village doesn't produce many university students at all, does it? Never mind students who get into major schools? No wonder you've done so well for yourself. I've also noticed that you don't have an accent. Is this how you speak at home too?"

Zhao Haochang's hands, which were resting on the table, began to tremble. He looked ready to get up and punch Luo Wenzhou into the floor.

"Oh, I forgot," Luo Wenzhou said, fanning the flames. "I heard that it's been years since you last visited your village. That's not good, Mr. Zhao. Your village put a lot of effort into raising you. How could you forget where you started?"

Zhao Haochang slammed his hands on the table, cutting Luo Wenzhou off. He tried to stand up but didn't complete the action—though his butt had already left the chair, he instead leaned forward, like a beast

ready to pounce. A few moments passed, and then, with incredible willpower, Zhao Haochang suppressed his rage and sat back down.

"Oh, really? A lot of effort? Unfortunately, I'm not really sure of that." Every word that came out of his mouth seemed marked by his clenched teeth. "I left ages ago, so I don't remember those people well. By the way, Officer, I funded my education with student loans and scholarships. And I saved up for my travel costs. I didn't need anyone to *raise* me. As for whether I've gone back… That's a bit beyond your jurisdiction, isn't it?"

"Maintaining public order and helping people form good habits is part of the job," Luo Wenzhou replied.

Zhao Haochang smirked. "So you guys are no more than a glorified neighborhood watch. No wonder so many major cases go unsolved."

"I accept your criticism." Having successfully provoked Zhao Haochang, Luo Wenzhou gave a disinterested shrug and changed the subject. "Speaking of major cases, I have something to ask you, Mr. Zhao." As he spoke, he selected a photo from his file and set it in front of Zhao Haochang. "This girl is named Chen Yuan. A few months ago, she died of a drug overdose. She went to the same school as you."

Furious as he was, Zhao Haochang didn't expect Luo Wenzhou to suddenly change the subject. "What a pity," he said dryly.

"The circumstances around her death were odd. Two weeks before she died, she contacted a university friend named Cui Ying and gave her important evidence implicating the director of the Huashi District Bureau in a crime." Luo Wenzhou stared into Zhao Haochang's eyes. "We just paid

Cui Ying a visit, and she handed over the evidence. She also mentioned you."

Zhao Haochang's eyes flitted back and forth. He clenched his hands into tight fists on his knees as though trying to figure out where he'd made a mistake.

"Cui Ying said that she shared Chen Yuan's story with you, and you stopped her from making a report. Is that true?"

"Yes." Quickly coming up with a way out of this, Zhao Haochang straightened slightly. "I did watch that video. It was quite shocking. But where was I supposed to make a report to? A higher department? Officer, I'm sitting across from you, and I'm not sure *you* aren't a wolf in sheep's clothing. What if you're actually working with them? Wouldn't reporting it have been tantamount to walking into a trap? Common civilians' abilities are limited. We can only focus on protecting ourselves. The lack of justice aside, is there anything wrong with wanting to survive?"

"No. That's understandable. But after you learned about this crime, what did you do besides convince Cui Ying to stay mum?"

"I did a little investigating on my own," Zhao Haochang replied. "But I was scared to dig too deep. Once, when I made a pretense of driving past, a few of the suspected drug dealers followed me for ages. I realized then how dangerous the situation was, and I warned Cui Ying not to talk about it."

Luo Wenzhou leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Cui Ying said that you told her that, if she ever killed someone, she should dump their body at the drug-exchange point in Huashi—that way, the police wouldn't even investigate. Is that true?"

The corner of Zhao Haochang's eye started twitching again. "I've been good to Cui Ying," he said expressionlessly. "She's in the same program I was, and I've always tried to protect her. I don't know why she'd say that. I was clearly just joking. I might've said it, I might not have—but being reported to the police just because of a joke and having it used against me… I can't tell whether I'm in a modern, civilized society or suffering through a Qing-dynasty literary inquisition—"

Before he finished speaking, Luo Wenzhou interrupted, "Where were you on the night of May twentieth?"

Zhao Haochang answered without hesitation. "I went to Chengguang Mansion with my friends. Then a friend drove me back to my office. I didn't leave there until near midnight."

"Where's your office?"

"Wenchang—"

Not letting Zhao Haochang finish, Luo Wenzhou pressed on with his aggressive questioning. "We acquired security footage from the Route Thirty-Four bus. The victim in the May twentieth case, He Zhongyi, got off the bus at Wenchang Road between nine and ten o'clock and was murdered not long after that. To muddy the waters, the murderer dumped the body on the West Side of Huashi—in what just so happened to be a drug exchange site. What do you have to say to that?"

Outside the interrogation room, Tao Ran spoke to Fei Du in a low voice. "Luo Wenzhou got the suspect riled up from the get-go. And he didn't expect Cui Ying to betray him, so he lost control a little just now. He clearly panicked when Luo Wenzhou mentioned that bus footage."

Fei Du adjusted his glasses. “Are you sure it’s okay for me to be here, Ge?”

“It’s fine. Deputy Lu approved it. He’s busy with Wang Hongliang or he’d have come to meet you.”

Fei Du thought about that and decided that he had zero interest in meeting some middle-aged man with a face full of wrinkles. He turned uncaringly back to the video feed, only to see Zhao Haochang’s expression change. For an instant, the suspect seemed frozen in his seat. Only a second later, though, it looked like he realized something. He smiled slyly.

“He’s hot-tempered and also gets offended more easily than other people, especially if someone pokes his weak spot.” Fei Du shook his head. “But he can still rein himself in and think things through calmly. What a genius. If he weren’t a suspect in this case, I’d pay good money for him to come work for me as a full-time legal consultant.”

“He got off at Wenchang Road,” Zhao Haochang repeated slowly inside the interrogation room. “And then? You guys have no idea what happened between when he got off the bus and when he was murdered, right?”

Luo Wenzhou slowly dropped his casual facade, his expression growing ugly.

“You guys have nothing.” Zhao Haochang leaned back in his chair slightly. “You think you’ll trick me into confessing to a crime with just a joke and some unconnected security footage?”

An uneasy silence stretched out in the tiny interrogation room. Luo Wenzhou remained silent as if there were no more tricks up his sleeve.

Zhao Haochang burst out laughing, then called Luo Wenzhou by name, as though he'd just remembered who this helpless officer was. "Sergeant Luo, you guys sure cut corners when it comes to solving cases." He extended a wrist, revealing a diamond-encrusted watch, and tapped its face. "Your twenty-four hours are almost up. If that's all you've got, can I leave early? If not, then I'll settle for a bed. I want to lie down."

For whatever reason, Luo Wenzhou felt that he didn't like that watch-tapping. He watched Zhao Haochang silently.

His expression appeared to amuse Zhao Haochang to no end. The suspect had successfully controlled his fury, but he couldn't hide his smugness. "Let me give you some advice, Sergeant Luo. Not everyone will fall for your long-outdated interrogation techniques. Don't be so confident. No one smart would ever become a police officer. I mean, what's the entry score for the Yancheng Public Security University? Is it even high enough for that school to be considered top-tier?"

As Zhao Haochang spoke, he stood and adjusted his collar theatrically.

"Zhao Fengnian, don't be too pleased with yourself," Luo Wenzhou said finally. His voice was light. "The basement of No. 12, Elegance Winery in the town of Bei'ershi, Xijiao, is still awaiting you."

Zhao Haochang's smile froze on his face.

Luo Wenzhou's index finger tapped on the table a few times. "Can you explain why He Zhongyi's old phone was at your house?"

The door of the interrogation room opened, and two expressionless police officers walked in. They moved to stand on either side of Zhao

Haochang and pushed him back down into the seat. Then, with a clack, a pair of shining handcuffs closed over the man's diamond-encrusted wrist.

Unexpectedly, the metal handcuffs and the metal watch band complemented each other. Both were gorgeous, ice-cold, and sharp.

Fei Du, who was simply watching everything unfold, suddenly squinted. "Your handcuffs sure are beautiful," he observed. "Could you give me a pair?"

Tao Ran barely knew how to react. "What are you going to do with a pair of handcuffs?"

Fei Du turned back to look at him. As though he'd lost the ability to talk, he just gave Tao Ran a meaningful look, his alluring eyes curving slightly. It took Tao Ran a moment to catch on. The debauchery of the wealthy was a mystery to a traditional man like Deputy Tao, whose life revolved around working overtime and paying his mortgage. He felt as though his vision itself was contaminated anytime he saw Fei Du lean into his "playboy" act.

In light of that, he scolded Fei Du seriously. "If you're going to continue to spout nonsense, you can leave." Fei Du coughed dryly, but he put away his metaphorical horns and tail and returned to behaving himself, not interjecting again.

The cold cuffs made Zhao Haochang shiver. Once he'd collected himself, he kept trying to explain things. "Wait. What house—"

Luo Wenzhou interrupted coldly. "Do you want to claim that the house isn't yours? Elegance Winery's security cameras would disagree, Mr. Zhao." At this point, Zhao Haochang was finally unable to keep the panic from his face, and the handcuffs rattled fiercely on his wrists. Luo Wenzhou

savored the suspect's expression, then added unhurriedly, "Besides, where did you get the idea that we didn't know where He Zhongyi went after he got off the bus at Wenchang Road?"

"Th-that's…impossible…"

"You're suspected of first-degree murder and of trying to dispose of a body. You even tried to coerce an innocent woman into committing suicide because you were afraid that the victim's family would recognize you. And you damaged the railing in case she got cold feet. On several occasions, you interfered with this investigation and attempted to mislead the police, then tried to pin it on others. We have undeniable proof of all this, Zhao Haochang. What do you have to say for yourself?" Luo Wenzhou looked up at Zhao Haochang, one corner of his mouth turned up in a taunting smirk, before ruthlessly hitting Zhao Haochang where he was most vulnerable. "You worked so hard all these years to make a name for yourself. You were only one step away from everything you've ever wanted, and with one slipup, you slid all the way down and became a murderer. What's destined to be yours will always be yours; there's no need to fight for what isn't. Ah, Zhao Fengnian, I pity you."

Zhao Haochang looked as if he'd been stabbed in the chest with a needle. Suddenly losing control, he started screaming hysterically. "What evidence have you got? Video footage of me murdering someone? My fingerprint, my DNA, on that phone? Zhang Donglai's fingerprints were clear on that tie—isn't that direct evidence? Which is more substantial? How dare you accuse me! Is it just because Zhang Donglai is related to your director? Just because he's rich? Faking evidence, framing innocent

people—you police are experts at that, aren't you? How do I know you didn't plant that phone—"

As Zhao Haochang finished yelling, he suddenly noticed Luo Wenzhou's mocking gaze. At that point, he suddenly snapped out of it, his brain going blank. All his blood rushed to his stiff limbs.

Luo Wenzhou put his elbows on the table, and stared Zhao Haochang right in his bloodshot eyes. "Zhang Donglai's fingerprints were clear on the tie? Mr. Zhao, you're even better than our forensics department. They need to stand there with some machine for ages before they can determine who a fingerprint belongs to, but you know just by guessing?"

Zhao Haochang was completely immobile, cold sweat pouring down below his shiny hair. As the cool, damp air conditioning blew over him, he shuddered.

Luo Wenzhou snorted, looking like a cat that had finished toying with a mouse. He pushed his chair back and stood, apparently losing interest in Zhao Haochang, and nodded lazily at the two officers waiting to the side. "The suspect's—we can call you the suspect *now*, right, Mr. Zhao?—criminality has been established. All that's left are the details. Those won't be hard. You guys can question him—I'm done here."

Then he walked out. At that point, Zhao Haochang jerked on his handcuffs, struggling against his restraints. "Hold on!" he shouted over the officers' warnings. "It…it was self-defense!"

Luo Wenzhou turned back to look at Zhao Haochang, nearly amazed. Dignity, he mused suddenly, was just like a thin sheet of paper; a person could spend their entire life protecting it, but when push came to shove, it was a simple matter to rip it off and reveal the raw flesh beneath. Back

when Tao Ran had taken care of the aftermath of that fight in Huashi, the most enthusiastic fighter—who'd been virtually illiterate on legal matters—had claimed the exact same thing. The sparkling, powerful lawyer, Mr. Zhao Haochang, had somehow found himself in precisely the same spot as Yu Lei the elementary school security guard!

"Am I hearing you right, Mr. Zhao?" Luo Wenzhou asked, pulling on his ear. "An industry elite with formal legal training is calling this self-defense? When you took aim at He Zhongyi, did you hit yourself in the head instead?"

Zhao Haochang stared hatefully at Luo Wenzhou, his face purpling with resentment. "He Zhongyi was a drug dealer who wouldn't stop contacting me," he said through gritted teeth. "I had no choice but to do what I did."

"He Zhongyi was dealing drugs?" Luo Wenzhou's voice grew low. "How do you know?"

Zhao Haochang's handcuffed hands came to rest on his thighs but wouldn't stop trembling. He was clenching his fists so tightly that his nails were digging his palms raw, but he didn't even seem to notice. "I have proof! I know that you guys are looking into Chen Yuan's case. Well, I'm an important witness! I can cooperate with that investigation, but you need to promise me a lighter sentence."

Luo Wenzhou glanced at the camera. Through the feed, his gaze happened to meet Fei Du's. Fei Du crossed his arms, leaned forward, and made an interested noise.

"What is it?" Tao Ran asked.

“He thought he’d won, then suffered a terrible blow and panicked. He saw red to the point that he confessed to the crime accidentally. He failed completely. Still, he managed to see things so clearly so quickly, adjust mentally, and propose a deal based on what you guys need. He sure reminds me of a centipede in a swamp,” Fei Du said in a low voice.

Those hundred-legged critters twitched and moved even in death.

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LUO WENZHOU SAT back down in front of Zhao Haochang. “Go ahead.”

The suspect took a deep breath. “I need your word, a clean towel, and a cup of coffee.”

The interrogation room was all about deception; it was a battle of wits and courage. In there, Luo Wenzhou decided, his word was worth nothing. He nodded readily. “All right.”

Before long, someone brought in a delicate bone-china tray that held a wet towel, a cup of fragrant coffee, and even a few Western snacks, plus a single cut flower still glistening with dew. Luo Wenzhou took one sniff and knew this was the work of that Fei guy.

The clerk and officer off to the side exchanged glances, both growing indignant. They hadn’t received perks like that even when they had to work during Lunar New Year!

Zhao Haochang's expression grew a bit calmer. The flower seemed to help him recover a bit of dignity, thereby giving him the strength to straighten up and cooperate again.

"Late last year, in my capacity as a legal consultant, I brought a team to Huashi's East Side to meet a client. We knew we were going to drink that night, so we didn't drive. When we left, I tried to flag down a taxi nearby, but I was followed." Zhao Haochang slowly finished eating, then took a languid sip of coffee. Huffing, he closed his eyes. "Was this brewed from Mandheling beans? The flavor is too harsh. It's barbaric."

"Was He Zhongyi the one following you?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

"Yes. He recognized me and asked me for money." Zhao Haochang's voice was steady now, and his gaze—which had been darting around not long ago—settled on Luo Wenzhou. "He wanted to extort a hundred thousand yuan out of me."

Luo Wenzhou took in Zhao Haochang's appearance. He was an attractive man, tall and broad with an agreeable set of features. Considering that, alongside the man's cleverness and social skills, it was hard to believe someone as diminutive as He Zhongyi could have threatened him. "And you gave it to him?"

"I did. You guys should be able to find a record of that."

Zhao Haochang pursed his lips a little. He'd been stuck in this dark room for an entire night, so dark circles hung on his pale face, making his eye sockets look extra deep. The effect was rather gloomy. "My parents were disabled. They had four children, including me, and two of my siblings were also born with problems. From my middle school years on, my family had no money to spend on me. I collected cicada molts,[20] helped

people carry things, did odd jobs for my teachers, gathered wild fruit on the mountain in the dead of night just so I could sell them at the market… I did everything simply to continue my studies so that one day, I could become something. But do you know what the villagers said? They called us a family of mutes. It wasn't until I finished high school and got into university that those people started looking at me differently. Then my house was always busy with fellow villagers coming to advertise their foolish daughters.

"Then, when I was in my third year of university, my brother was born—the second son my parents had hoped and dreamed of. But he was born mute and deaf with mental disabilities, just like my younger sister. It was a nightmare. After that, we became just a family of retards again. They said it was hereditary, and my children could well turn out that way too. Can you understand? My career was just taking off—I'd even found a girlfriend I loved a lot. I couldn't just let some gutter rat start spouting nonsense in front of her, so I had no choice. I had to pay him off so he'd go away."

Luo Wenzhou pulled out a cigarette, put it in his mouth, and lit it. He studied Zhao Haochang through the haze of white smoke. "Gutter rat?"

Even now, Zhao Haochang didn't avoid Luo Wenzhou's gaze. He was rather strong-willed. "You were born and raised here in Yancheng, right, Sergeant Luo? You look like you grew up in a nice family, so you'd have no idea what it feels like to be all alone in a big city, living in one of those crowded West Side rental buildings. I never dared to go out with classmates. While I was in school, I did everything I could to earn scholarships. After I started working, I did endless overtime just to send a

bit more money home. My parents had no idea what kind of life I led in the city—they just asked for more and more money. They even wanted to try to have another child because of my brother's disabilities—and they were old, so they wanted me to raise it. All the rumors, gossip, and pressure they faced from the villagers wound up becoming my problem in the end.

"But even though my family was about to suck me dry, I felt no resentment. I hoped I could help them live a better life back home. I even took time off just to go back to help them build their new house. But when I went to visit the county seat during that visit, all I returned to was a pile of rubble. My parents, my siblings—they'd all died in a fire. Not a single one made it out. I was devastated, and rumors still began flying around the village, saying that I'd had something to do with the fire!"

He'd reached the crux of things. "Oh. So did you have something to do with it?" Luo Wenzhou asked, evidently indifferent.

Zhao Haochang pursed his lips. "What kind of animal asks such a question?" he burst out, furious.

Luo Wenzhou crossed his legs and looked Zhao Haochang up and down without shock or anger. Finally, just when Zhao Haochang thought that he couldn't bear that gaze anymore, Luo Wenzhou flicked his cigarette leisurely and gave the suspect a slight smile. "All right—you're pure and innocent, with a tragic past. Please continue with what you were telling me about He Zhongyi."

"I left home and changed my name, thinking I could finally be free of that uncivilized place, but only a few years later, my peace was disturbed once again. That trash found me. He said it wasn't the first time he'd seen me and that he'd seen my girlfriend too. He threatened to tell Zhang Ting

about my family's genetic history, and about the rumors around that fire, if I didn't pay him." Zhao Haochang's original calm suddenly seemed to reach some sort of boiling point. His hatred swept toward Luo Wenzhou as if it were a physical substance, so thick it seemed to mask the scent of coffee in the room. "They ruined the first half of my life, and now they want to destroy my future too. All my hard work, my hopes and dreams, would have gone up in smoke because of these disgusting vermin. Why?!"

"So you decided to commit murder?" Luo Wenzhou asked, his voice low.

"I didn't." Zhao Haochang's chest heaved dramatically. "I wanted things to end peacefully. I even gave him a hundred thousand yuan in cash. I only asked that he not mention me to others. He wasn't satisfied, though. He kept pestering me. I actually braced myself to be harassed like that for the rest of my life. I even got a second, private number so he could contact me.

"That year, my mentor extended an invitation to me, and I went back to school to help two students get some practical, hands-on experience. That's how I met Cui Ying. She's quiet and highly dependent on others, and whenever something came up, she needed to ask me for help. One day, she contacted me in a panic, as though something big had happened. After she'd told me some of it, I realized the gravity of the situation and immediately stopped her from continuing on a phone call. I asked her to meet me in a…a private place."

"She showed you what Chen Yuan sent her."

Zhao Haochang's voice was quieter now. "I was really shocked. I wanted to protect Cui Ying, so I instructed her not to tell others. That night,

after I got home, I couldn't sleep, so I decided to verify the evidence myself, since I was familiar with the West Side. When I got there, though, I saw He Zhongyi…with another very skinny young man. I hid nearby until nighttime and saw He Zhongyi's friend sneak off to Scenic Street West, which was exactly where Chen Yuan had said there was a drug-dealing hotspot. He was an addict!"

His description of a "very skinny young man" who was He Zhongyi's friend probably pointed to Ma Xiaowei. Zhao Haochang wasn't just spinning a story at random; he was basing this on something.

Zhao Haochang took a huge gulp of coffee. "That junkie took the drugs home. I followed him and I watched as he got to his place and turned on the light. The things happening inside were silhouetted in the window, so I saw He Zhongyi doing the drugs with him! Later, in an attempt to get more money out of me, He Zhongyi went back on his promise and went to pester Zhang Ting. I caught him red-handed!"

"He Zhongyi pestered Zhang Ting? Was that the same time you saw Zhang Donglai hit him?"

"Yes, Zhang Donglai hit him, and he was too scared to fight back, but he kept staring at me," Zhao Haochang replied coldly. "He Zhongyi wanted revenge—I know he did—and it started to scare me. After that, I caved again and gave him what he wanted."

"That phone."

"He'd nagged me for it in various ways before. He said he'd seen other people with that model, and that he was jealous."

Luo Wenzhou picked up a pen and spun it between his fingers, looking bored, then rapped on the table with it. "All right, maybe he did

pester Zhang Ting, but do you have X-ray vision? How could you tell that he was doing drugs just from a silhouette in a wind—"

"I said I have proof!" Zhao Haochang interrupted. "I installed two pinhole cameras in the Golden Triangle lot!"

Everyone—both inside and outside the interrogation room—froze. They hadn't uncovered those in their investigation.

"Not at the scene, of course. Otherwise, those scumbags would've found them ages ago," Zhao Haochang said, seemingly knowing what Luo Wenzhou was thinking. His gaze disdainful, he continued, "The West Side alleys are convoluted and confusing. In some places, the road cuts off out of nowhere. Other spots seem very hidden, but you can really see everything there as clear as day from the right angle. Anyway, I installed one camera on top of the window of He Zhongyi's apartment and put the other one on the roof of a nearby public washroom."

The clerk's forehead was covered in sweat. They almost couldn't keep up.

"What'd your cameras capture?"

"Several drug deals in the Golden Triangle lot. Sometimes it was just drug dealers, but sometimes police were patrolling the area, keeping an eye out for them."

"Where's the footage?" Luo Wenzhou demanded immediately.

"Under the floor lamp in my basement. There's a safe there. You guys can go look," Zhao Haochang said without any apparent reservations. "Then you'll know that what I'm saying is true. He Zhongyi was really careful. He usually got his friends to show up on his behalf. But on the

night of the twentieth, I got footage of him asking a friend to trade the phone I'd bought him for drugs. Their meeting place changed at the last minute—there should be a text message to that effect on the phone."

Luo Wenzhou gave him an odd look. "There was a note on He Zhongyi's forehead. All it said was 'money.' On the night of the twentieth, when he went to find you, he was holding a brown paper bag. Our analysis determined that that note was written on a scrap of that bag. Did you do that?"

"Yes." Zhao Haochang raised his eyebrows. "He followed me to Chengguang Mansion and refused to leave, saying that he was there to return my money. There was twenty thousand yuan in that paper bag. Officer Luo, how does a poor kid from out of town get that kind of money, if not by selling drugs?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't have an answer.

"And let me ask you this," Zhao Haochang continued. "How would you feel if a drug addict extorting you for money suddenly said he was paying you back? Would you believe that he was back on the proper path and happily accept? No way. It would have to be a trick to get more of your money. He'd be giving you twenty thousand so that he could ask for two hundred thousand—two million—in the future! What does that kind of greedy bastard care about other than money?" Zhao Haochang's eyes seemed as deep as wells, as though no light could enter them. They were utterly empty and piercingly cold. "I did it to protect myself. I was protecting the people. What did I do wrong, Officer, when you useless maggots refused to do anything?"

“You’re right, Mr. Zhao.” Luo Wenzhou nodded calmly. “Can you tell us the combination to your safe? We need to verify your proof of He Zhongyi’s crimes.”

Another police officer stepped up to hand Zhao Haochang a paper and pen. He wrote the combination down unhesitatingly, a cold smile on his face. Luo Wenzhou immediately sent those numbers to Lang Qiao, who was still at Elegance Winery, and five minutes later, he received her confirmation text.

“Thanks.” Luo Wenzhou stood up, smiling at Zhao Haochang. “I just have two last things to say to you, Mr. Zhao. Will you deign to listen to them?”

Zhao Haochang was forced to look up at him.

Luo Wenzhou raised a finger. “First, He Zhongyi’s autopsy showed that he’d never touched illegal drugs in his life. As for that phone, a witness proved that his roommate stole it.”

Zhao Haochang’s brow furrowed. He was just about to argue when Luo Wenzhou raised another finger.

“Second, if you were capable of installing a camera above He Zhongyi’s window, why didn’t you put it in his room? You could’ve filmed him day and night, capturing all his daily routines and bodily functions. Wouldn’t that have been a much simpler way to confirm whether he was a junkie? You’d only have needed to film him using drugs a single time to have the proof you needed to be free of him, right?”

Zhao Haochang seemed to be frozen.

“You’re too smart, Mr. Zhao.” Luo Wenzhou chuckled. “It sure is a relief to a lowly officer like me to catch an unrepentant bastard like you. I think spending all my free time here at work might even have been worth it. As for the promise I gave you… Sorry, but I’m a bastard too. The only promises I’ll keep will be to my future wife. You? Forget it.”

Once Luo Wenzhou finished speaking, he was too lazy even to look at that deceitful slimeball, so he left the interrogation room.

Tao Ran, still observing, didn’t understand. “What does Lao-Luo mean?”

“From the footage, we can figure out roughly where the camera is,” Fei Du explained in a low voice. His eyes were trained unblinkingly on Zhao Haochang, who was breaking down. “Zhao Haochang doesn’t care whether He Zhongyi was innocent, if he really was involved with Ma Xiaowei, or if he really did drugs. From the moment He Zhongyi decided to contact him to return the money, doing a good deed he’d never appreciate, Zhao Haochang was already planning his death.”

That was when it hit Tao Ran. “You’re saying that Zhao Haochang anonymously sent that recording from outside He Zhongyi’s window to Wang Hongliang!” He’d tried to get Wang Hongliang to kill He Zhongyi, so that Zhao Haochang would never have to so much as show his face!

“I don’t know how He Zhongyi escaped that, but it’s certainly something Zhao Haochang would do.” Fei Du turned and watched Luo Wenzhou, who was some distance away, walk toward them on slightly unsteady legs, a coat draped over his shoulders. Turning back, he nodded to Tao Ran. “I’m not really interested in the rest of this, Ge. I’m heading out.”

He adjusted his glasses and strolled toward the exit. As he passed Luo Wenzhou, he glanced at the sergeant's stiff posture with curiosity, then said very politely, "It looks like you strained your back. Now that you're getting older, you should take care of yourself."

Both annoyed and amused, Luo Wenzhou decided not to dignify that with a response. At the same time, he got the sense that Fei Du was a little happier and more open today. Perhaps that was because he'd finally cleaned a long-festering wound; the process may have been painful, and it may have been bloody, but now the wound had a chance to heal. "Can I ask you something?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "Do you think Zhao Haochang killed his family?"

But Fei Du refused to have a proper conversation with him. "Sergeant Luo," he answered sarcastically, "you tricked the man using such a wide variety of methods, and you still haven't figured out who killed his family?"

Since Luo Wenzhou's back was killing him, he couldn't quite stand straight. He put a hand on Fei Du's shoulder, unceremoniously using him as a human cane. "I don't think it was him. Xiao-Qiao-er said that he saved the sleeve protector of the guy who started the fire—and frankly, that's terrifying—but I think that, at worst, he did nothing to save them. The severity of a person's crimes usually increases over time. It's rare for a beginner to meticulously plan the murder of their entire family, then carry it out." Fei Du's expression hardened; he thought Luo Wenzhou was implying something.

Luo Wenzhou shrugged, however. "I wasn't talking about you. I've already apologized."

"You're pulling on my hair," Fei Du said tonelessly.

He squirmed away, dislodging Luo Wenzhou's claws, and wiped his shoulders off with disdain before leaving.

At that point, a police officer dashed up. "Sergeant Luo! Huang Jinglian was shocked when he saw the evidence, and he gave up everything! Including Wang Hongliang!"

Luo Wenzhou whirled around.

"In regards to Chen Yuan, Huang Jinglian said that debacle started when they received a parcel. He opened it and discovered that it contained a video showing their entire drug-dealing process. That's when they realized they had a traitor among them and started investigating. They ended up finding Chen Yuan's camera, so they…"

Luo Wenzhou froze. Zhao Haochang's plan had been to use Wang Hongliang to kill He Zhongyi, but perhaps he'd hidden his camera too well, or perhaps Huang Jinglian and the others didn't think the culprit would use a stationary camera, because they missed it entirely. They hadn't suspected He Zhongyi; their first thought had been to search for a mole. As a result, an innocent girl died in He Zhongyi's place.

But that reckless youth who hadn't known how to read people hadn't made it out in the end himself.

"Keep grilling him," Luo Wenzhou said, stretching his back out with great difficulty. "Find out who sent He Zhongyi that text on the night of the twentieth."

"Yes, sir!" the officer said, and ran off.

Luo Wenzhou stood there for a while, lost in thought. He was jarred back to reality when he caught a sudden whiff of something. The scent was

rather faint, just barely brushing his nose, then turned deeper—the kind of woody male fragrance that lingered. Smelling it for a while started to make his chest itch. Luo Wenzhou glanced all around, searching for the scent's source, until finally, he sniffed his own fingers.

It had come from Fei Du's shoulder.

Luo Wenzhou clicked his tongue and rubbed his fingers together, displeased. Now that he knew what had emitted the scent, that itchy feeling in his chest was gone, and he no longer thought the smell was pleasant. "What the hell are you spraying yourself with? You wasted my hormones."

Chapter 25

AFTER FERMENTING for the weekend, reports of the Sky Screen suicide attempt erupted all over the news bright and early Monday morning. Before even walking out of the parking lot, Fei Du had already been ambushed twice; that was when he realized that he'd suddenly gone viral.

Fei-zong contemplated this in his office, holding a London fog, half finished and gone cool. He decided it would be a shame to have spent all that money for nothing and to let his newfound fame go to waste. Calling his assistant over, he asked her to have the marketing department work on a project about corporations' social responsibilities.

Ms. Miao, special assistant to the chairman, noted his sudden idea on her laptop. She hesitated for a bit before leaving, though; it seemed she wanted to say something but couldn't quite get it out. Finally, eyes reddened, she managed to voice a tentative question. "Fei-zong, was everything you said on the screen that day true?"

"Hm?" Fei Du was flipping casually through his agenda. He looked up at her with a teasing, indulgent smile. "Of course not. Suicide prevention experts provided those lines. They wouldn't just let me freestyle in a situation like that. You bought it? That's cute."

The redness in Ms. Miao's eyes spread to her face. Scoffing, she turned to leave.

"Hey, wait," Fei Du called out to her with another smile. "Am I required to sell my good looks at any company-related meals today?"

Ms. Miao rolled her eyes. Her heartfelt maternal instincts had gone down the drain. “No. We don’t, at present, have a pressing need for the precious, intangible asset that is your beauty.”

“Good.” Fei Du took off his suit jacket and closed his notebook. “I’m heading out for a bit, then. If you need me, call me.”

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HALF AN HOUR LATER, Fei Du left the hospital with He Zhongyi’s mother and hightailed it to the city bureau.

Wang Xiujuan had a serious illness, and she was getting on in age. Thus, given all the sorrow and grief she’d experienced, she’d been kept at the hospital for observation over the weekend. Now that she’d finally been discharged, she was getting He Zhongyi’s remains.

An investigation into the murder of a young out-of-towner had managed to unearth a drug-related corruption case that shocked the entire country. In turn, the Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau had no choice but to team up with the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, leading to endless overtime. Next to that, He Zhongyi’s case faded into the background. Only Luo Wenzhou, Tao Ran, and Lang Qiao, who had first handled the case, were charged with handling the aftermath.

He Zhongyi’s body had been tidied; he didn’t look as frightening as he had when he was first discovered by the roadside. His face was peaceful—an effect created, with some effort, by the mortuary cosmetologist. Zhao

Yulong and He Zhongyi's coworkers all came to help, and even Ma Xiaowei showed up, supervised by Xiao Haiyang and another police officer.

Zhang Donglai also showed up in the middle of the process; perhaps he'd felt pressured to do so. Dressed quite soberly, he watched from a distance as Fei Du supported Wang Xiujuan, then walked over clumsily with an unnatural jerk of the head. He gave Wang Xiujuan a stiff nod and said, "I really didn't kill your son, Auntie."

He was very tall. Wang Xiujuan took a wary step back.

Zhang Donglai appeared to rack his brain. "But I did hit him…" Fei Du shot him an icy glare, and he rubbed his nose awkwardly, not daring to say more. He gestured to He Zhongyi's mother to continue what she'd been doing.

Wang Xiujuan was petite and very thin. Whenever Fei Du spoke to her, he had to bend down a little, which made him seem extra gentle. He sent Zhang Donglai away with a glance, then murmured in Wang Xiujuan's ear, "If this is too much for you, I can take care of the rest of the paperwork."

Wang Xiujuan shook her head with great difficulty. She pulled her hand from Fei Du's grasp and stumbled forward a few steps. Then, suddenly remembering something, she turned back. "Did my Zhongyi do something wrong?" she asked. "Did he ever do anything bad?"

Fei Du watched her for a long time, then said with certainty, "No, Auntie."

Zhao Haochang was sly. He was an expert at rousing people's emotions, scapegoating others, and using logic to mislead. After listening to his declarations, one felt that the entire society was just one huge mud pit,

and that Zhao Haochang was the sole pure, white lotus blooming in the cesspool. Only after Lang Qiao found physical evidence and Luo Wenzhou tricked and deceived his suspect did they get any truth out of him. Only then could they just barely piece together the sequence of events.

When He Zhongyi, a young man from a faraway mountain village, arrived in noisy Yancheng, he'd felt both hope and pressure in his chest. He'd found bustling traffic and beautiful people. Young men and women his age burst with life as they walked to and from school. Everyone on the street looked ready to be stopped for a street snap at any moment. But He Zhongyi had arrived with no friends or family. He could only afford to stay in the most run-down residences, slogging through mud and accompanied by the smell of sewage as he commuted between home and work.

Besides his apathetic middle-aged neighbors, he was surrounded by hooligans who always got involved in the wrong things, from drugs and gambling to prostitution: There were all sorts of riffraff. Wanting to steer clear of them, He Zhongyi budgeted his money meticulously every day in his little notebook. He saved whatever he could, unwilling to waste a single minute. All he wanted was to make enough money to repay his debt and cover his mother's medical bills. Occasionally, he also dreamed of one day having a place in the city to call his own.

Ever since he was young, he'd looked up to an older boy from his village. Although he scrupulously abided by the agreement they'd struck that He Zhongyi would never to tell anyone about the other boy's presence in Yancheng, He Zhongyi still wanted to get closer to him. Unfortunately, Fengnian-dage avoided him like the plague. After mulling that over carefully, He Zhongyi figured that it might be because he was too poor. In a

place as large as Yancheng, where everyone ran around day and night, nobody had it easy. Who would want a poor relative asking them for money repeatedly? The situation saddened He Zhongyi, but he understood, so he was careful to maintain only basic contact with Fengnian-dage. He only asked after him occasionally, meanwhile doing his best to save up. He felt that he had to maintain that basic courtesy, even if the other boy didn't want to hear from him. There was no reason to end their relationship just because He Zhongyi owed the other boy money.

Finally, He Zhongyi saved up enough for the first repayment: a whole twenty thousand yuan. That wasn't even enough to cover a single bottle of booze for a few rich young playboys, but it was the largest sum He Zhongyi had ever accumulated in his life. He tucked it away cautiously, much too afraid to show it off. Indeed, he didn't dare let anyone see, since he was always surrounded by his no-good roommates. With that money in his hands, he didn't feel safe; he thought it'd be best to pay it back as soon as possible. It was tough to track down Fengnian-dage, though. With no other choice, He Zhongyi went to find Zhang Ting, whom he'd once seen with Fengnian-dage.

He Zhongyi had mustered his courage to tell her that he wanted to find out where his dage was. He stuttered the whole time—and, unexpectedly, scared the girl.

Strange men weren't scary. Strange, poor, unsightly men were scary.

The girl's extreme reaction got He Zhongyi beaten up. That on its own was nothing, but Fengnian-dage stood right there watching. In the end, he calmly broke up the fight, persuading the attacker to stop; he didn't so much as look at He Zhongyi, as though he didn't know him and had never

seen him before. That was when He Zhongyi slowly started to understand that Fengnian-dage might not want someone else from his hometown around. They weren't family; they weren't friends. Maybe, to Fengnian-dage, He Zhongyi was like a stubborn mud stain on a crisp, white shirt, one Fengnian-dage couldn't wash out.

Afterward, Fengnian-dage gave He Zhongyi a brand-new phone, but he acted extremely insincere. That was when He Zhongyi decided that he shouldn't contact Fengnian-dage again once he'd paid back all the money he owed.

Once, on a delivery run, He Zhongyi spotted Fengnian-dage chatting and laughing with friends nearby. He purposely avoided Fengnian-dage, not approaching, but he accidentally overheard the group discuss visiting a place called Chengguang Mansion for its opening night. He Zhongyi had twenty thousand yuan in hand; he planned to wait on the way to Chengguang Mansion to give it to Fengnian-dage.

But…

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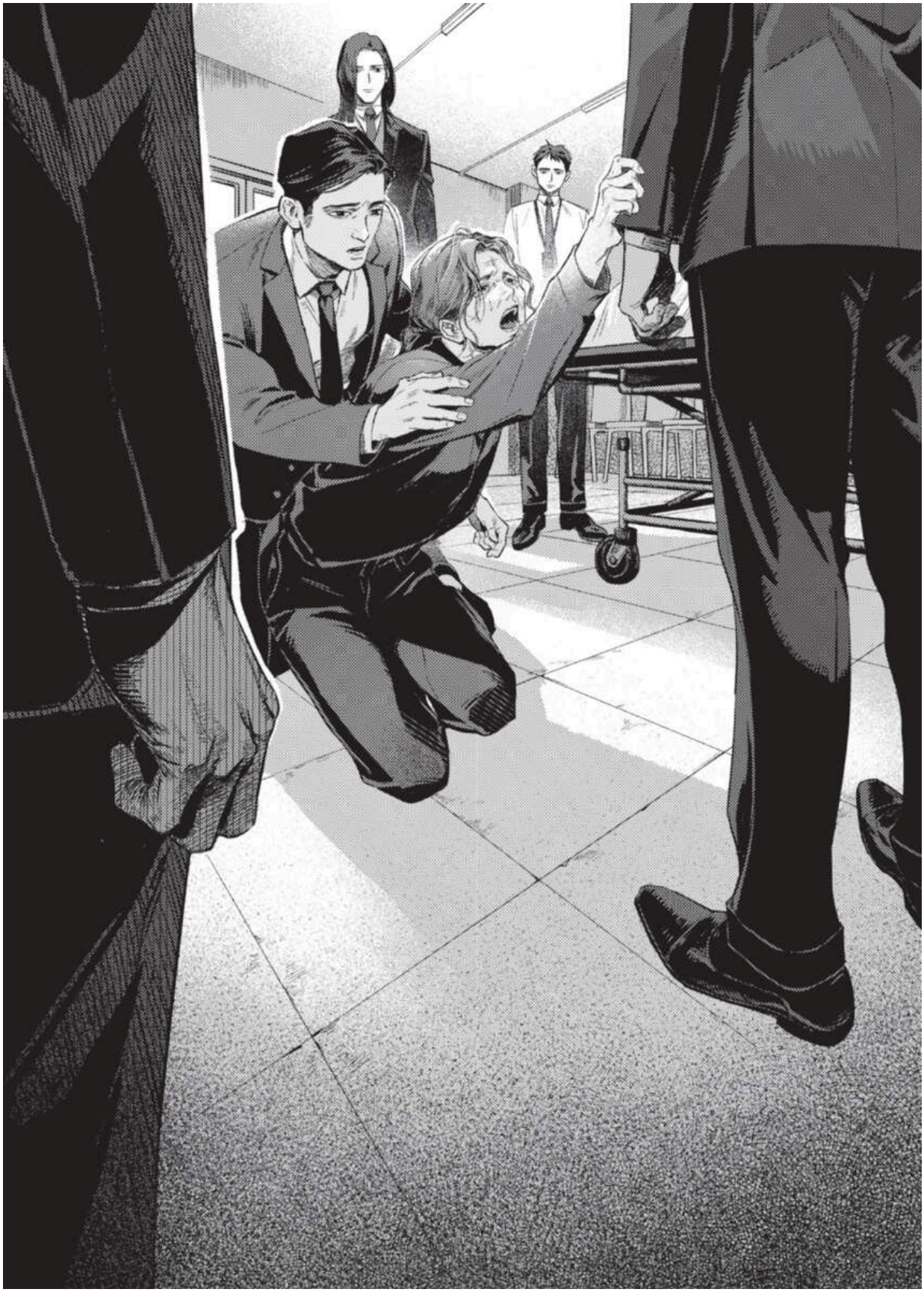
HE ZHONGYI'S BODY was brought outside covered neatly in white fabric. Wang Xiujuan's eyes turned bright red; her knees gave out and she fell to the ground. The crowd around her rushed over to help as the woman's murky tears flowed from the corners of her eyes and sank into the hair at her temples. Grabbing someone's sleeve, she started sobbing

incoherently. “I taught him to be good to others—to be an honest man. Was I wrong?”

No one could answer that question. They all stayed silent.

Wang Xiujuan didn’t have much education, and she couldn’t read He Zhongyi’s death certificate. Tao Ran had to wait until she calmed down a little, then sit her down and read each line aloud to her. After every sentence, he explained what the words meant, and Wang Xiujuan nodded numbly. She wasn’t sobbing anymore. Instead, she sat silently to one side, tears flowing endlessly down her face.

Zhang Donglai snuck to Fei Du’s side with his head lowered. Kicking some pebbles on the ground, he scratched his head. “Lord Fei, Tingting wanted me to ask…” he coughed. “‘What is all this shit?!’ Even my uncle is getting reassigned over this. He won’t be in a leadership position anymore. Did my family offend the gods this year?”



Fei Du stood a few steps away, watching Wang Xiujuan. “Did you find that gray striped tie?” he asked suddenly.

Zhang Donglai froze. “What?”

“You don’t need to look for it anymore. It’s sitting in the station right now. Your fingerprints and the victim’s blood are on it. Someone found it in your car and reported it.”

Zhang Donglai’s jaw dropped. He gaped at Fei Du for a while, wide-eyed, until his rusty brain finally finished buffering. Although he only vaguely understood what Fei Du meant, he reached up to swipe a stray strand of hair back and let out a brief-but-powerful expletive: “Fuck!”

Fei Du patted his shoulder. “Tell Tingting to stop asking. With a scumbag like that, it’s better to cut her losses.”

“Hold on. Wait.” Zhang Donglai waved, feeling a little woozy. “You’re saying that, u-um, what’s-his-name stole my tie, killed someone, and then tried to frame me for it? Is that what you’re saying?”

Fei Du just leveled him with a look.

“N-no way! I’ve been good to him, right? Zhao Haochang? He’s nothing at Rongshun! He’d never have gotten to touch any good projects if not for me! It was all because I introduced you guys that he got to work on *your* stuff! My father and uncle never said anything when Tingting brought him home—they treated him well, like he was already family! What’d I ever do to him?”

Fei Du thought about it, then replied, “Breathe.”

Zhang Donglai fell silent. His limited brain cells pondered the situation for a long time, yet he couldn’t believe it. “No way,” he muttered.

“I still think… Are you sure that Luo Wenzhou guy is reliable? How could he…”

“If ‘that Luo Wenzhou guy’ wasn’t reliable, you’d be the one in there awaiting public prosecution for murder,” replied Luo Wenzhou himself, who’d at some point come up behind Zhang Donglai and Fei Du. Pointing to Zhang Donglai, he added, “Please grow up a bit, Young Master.”

Zhang Donglai was kind of scared of Luo Wenzhou. Whenever he saw the sergeant, his calf cramped up. And now he’d been caught talking about him behind his back! He was too scared even to fart, and like a kicked puppy, he ran away.

His hands behind his back, Luo Wenzhou stood beside Fei Du, watching the living bid her final farewell to the dead. “What’s going to happen to her?”

“The owner of the Economy and Trade Center is taking advantage of all this buzz to start a charity foundation for rural parents who lost their only children. They’ve already sent a press release about it to the major news outlets. That should cover her future medical expenses and living fees. But…”

But the money couldn’t bring her son back.

Other people could help her monetarily, but no one could give her back He Zhongyi.

“Oh, right.” Luo Wenzhou fished a photo from his file folder. “Let me show you something.”

The photo showed a fountain pen inside an evidence bag. Even from the picture, it was clear how heavy the pen was. Its lid was engraved with

the name *Fei*. “This was one of Zhao Haochang’s treasures. Looks familiar, right? Is it yours?”

He’d hoped to see a trace of shock on Fei-zong’s face, but Fei Du only took a brief glance before responding nonchalantly. “Oh, so he had that. I lost it last year on Christmas. That was probably the first day he came to my office as head legal consultant.”

Luo Wenzhou watched the young man silently. Christmas *was* the exact date that Zhao Haochang had written on the label for the pen, so if Luo Wenzhou hadn’t known better, he’d have suspected Fei Du of *giving* the pen to him.

“When I can’t find something, I think back to what was happening before and after I lost it. Once I remember roughly what mental state I was in and where I probably placed it, I just go look for it.” Fei Du shrugged. “If I still can’t find it, I figure someone took it. But a lot of people came to my office that day. I wanted to avoid any unpleasant confrontations, so I didn’t say anything.”

“Don’t you want to know what the pen’s label said?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

Fei Du shrugged again. His eyes rested on the photo, but he was looking somewhere behind the pen. The picture had been taken from far away, and part of Zhao Haochang’s floor lamp was in the shot. That tree that seemed almost preserved in time glowed, dogging the country boy who’d changed his name that year.

“Not really,” said Fei Du. “And when the trial’s over, you don’t need to return it to me. It smells now. I don’t want it.”

Epilogue

ONCE HE GOT WANG XIUJUAN SETTLED, Fei Du stole away without saying goodbye and drove alone to the city's outskirts.

It was late evening. Perhaps due to the gloomy weather, the shadows of the tombstones in the cemetery seemed to flicker. Birds swooped low in the sky, and the scent of wet soil wafted from the ground as the dead, despite their deep slumber, seemed to watch the living passersby. Holding a bouquet of lilies, Fei Du trod the same path for the seventh year in a row. He came to a stop at a slightly weathered gravestone. The face of the woman in the portrait on the stone was pale, her expression morose, and she looked at him with delicate, unfading beauty.

Fei Du met her gaze for a moment, then rolled up his sleeves and wiped the grave down with a fine, soft cloth. When he was done, he extended two fingers, kissed them gently, and pressed them to the gravestone. For the first time in seven years, he gave the woman's portrait a slightly relaxed smile—as if a casket had been pressing on his chest, and he'd finally pushed it off and laid it to rest in an empty grave.

It was only after Fei Du left that someone else snuck over to the grave like a thief. He put a handful of small white chrysanthemums on the woman's grave, offering a polite bow. It was Luo Wenzhou.

For a moment, this uninvited visitor engaged in silent discourse with the owner of the grave. Then, just as he stepped away to leave, something cold struck his face. Without warning, rain began to fall. Caught without an umbrella, Luo Wenzhou clicked his tongue. He decided to cover his head

with his arms and make a run for it, but just as he lifted his hand, a shadow loomed over his head.

He whirled around, startled. Fei Du had doubled back, and now stood by the grave holding an open umbrella above Luo Wenzhou's head, giving the sergeant a complicated look.

The spotty drizzle spent about a minute singing warm-ups before letting loose properly as a howling storm. Luo Wenzhou had been caught red-handed, and now he was face-to-face with Fei Du in front of the grave. The little white flowers he'd brought were still right there, the round blossoms' stems fanning out in the falling rain.

For an instant, mighty Sergeant Luo wanted to flee to North Korea.

Trying to explain himself, he stammered, "I…uh… Well… Actually, this was just on my way, so I thought I'd drop by."

Fei Du didn't respond. The mood grew even weirder. Luo Wenzhou felt as though even covering his face with the Great Wall couldn't have hidden him from Fei Du's inescapable field of vision. He turned away nervously, resolving to deflect with a few more empty words and then run off. "You two carry on," Luo Wenzhou said politely, nodding to the portrait of the woman who'd died seven years earlier. "I've got work tomorrow, and I shouldn't intrude further. Bye."

He began to stride forward as he spoke, about to rush through the downpour, but the black umbrella followed him like a shadow, preventing him from becoming one with nature. Fei Du hadn't moved his feet; he'd only extended the arm holding the umbrella. Rain quickly soaked his other shoulder, and a cloud of mist seemed to envelop his whole body.

At last, he asked quietly, “So those flowers were from you?”

For the past seven years, Fei Du had come annually to the cemetery around the anniversary of his mother’s death. Sometimes, when he was late by a day or two, he was unexpectedly met with a bunch of those tacky little white flowers. He’d wondered who would come to see her. The cemetery received visitors daily, and the management didn’t keep a close eye on all of them, so when Fei Du asked, they had no answer. Putting the flowers there didn’t seem malicious, so Fei Du didn’t pursue the matter too seriously. For all the possibilities he’d considered, though, it had never occurred to him that the visitor might be Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou grunted awkwardly. “If I was visiting, I couldn’t come empty-handed, could I?” he said evasively. “And weren’t you…um… Didn’t you already leave?”

Fei Du stared at him, his gaze even more inscrutable than before. “How did you know I’d left?” he asked in return.

Luo Wenzhou wasn’t sure how to respond. *Wonderful.* He was the sergeant of a criminal investigation team, yet he’d confessed without any prompting whatsoever!

Fei Du pressed the handle of his heavy umbrella into Luo Wenzhou’s hand, then bent down to retrieve a silk handkerchief he’d dropped next to the gravestone. “I forgot this.”

Now that this young master had bestowed the heavy responsibility of bearing the umbrella upon him, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t leave, yet the obligation to stay embarrassed him. He lingered behind Fei Du, letting his gaze wander and pretending to take in the view. All around them, the serious, dignified portraits of the dead in their neat rows honored him with

their attention. In the distance, the downpour had melded the gray sky and the surrounding mountains on the city's outskirts. Even the mountain squirrels were burrowing away in their tree hollows, refusing guests.

Luo Wenzhou's gaze flitted aimlessly around for a while before he finally threw in the towel and let it rest on Fei Du, the only other living being in the little shelter created by the black umbrella.

To his surprise, Luo Wenzhou found that so long as that living being wasn't rattling off disparaging statements about justice and morality, he was a beautiful man, tall with straight shoulders. Fei Du's dark-gray shirt was well-fitted and ironed, and a wet patch stuck to the flesh of his waist almost indecently. He *was* easy on the eyes.

Suddenly, Fei Du turned around. Luo Wenzhou didn't have time to look away; their gazes quietly collided, leaving Luo Wenzhou breathless for an instant.

He coughed dryly. "As your ge, can I have a little chat with you?"

Finally, the smirk with which Luo Wenzhou was so familiar reappeared on Fei Du's face. "'Ge'? Sergeant Luo, are you this presumptuous with all the boys?"

The long-awaited return of his taunting tone shattered the tension between them. Luo Wenzhou sighed in relief, though he would've been hard-pressed to say why. Reaching out, he pointed at a small set of steps below the grave. "Let's wait here for a while. We'll need to drive down the mountain to get out of here, and it'd be hazardous in this storm."

Neither agreeing nor refusing, Fei Du wiped part of one step dry and sat down. Still holding up the heavy carbon-fiber umbrella, Luo Wenzhou

looked back at the woman's grave and bowed to her, then took a seat next to Fei Du.

Fei Du often gave the impression—at least to Luo Wenzhou—that he was just like the wire-rimmed glasses that sometimes perched upon his nose: pretty and delicate-looking, but in fact icy and unapproachable in some very subtle way. But now, trapped under the same umbrella as the young man, Luo Wenzhou was shocked to discover that Fei Du radiated heat. The torrential rain had enveloped everything in the blink of an eye; in its presence, the scorching heat of summer lay down its arms and retreated into the distance. Yet as that cold wetness deluged them, it only served to highlight the warmth of the body next to his.

As it turned out, Fei Du wasn't a vampire, zombie, or any other ghost or ghoul that haunted the night. Maybe he really was just a mortal made of flesh and blood.

Luo Wenzhou broke the silence. "I come and take a look at the grave from time to time. After all, hers was the first case I ever handled that involved a death."

Fei Du raised an eyebrow. "That's why it left a strong impression on you?"

"Mm-hmm." With that short answer, Luo Wenzhou nodded and fell silent for a moment, then added, "But that impression wasn't of your mother."

Fei Du replied indifferently, "Well, what kind of corpse hasn't the great Sergeant Luo seen at this point? Of course—"

"I could never forget *you*."

Fei Du paused. He looked at Luo Wenzhou with slight astonishment, wondering whether the man had taken the wrong pills today.

But Luo Wenzhou didn't realize how suggestive his words had sounded. He rubbed his calloused fingers slowly against the umbrella's handle and stared at the flat limestone path ahead of them. "I remember that the weather was terrible that day too. When we got the report, Tao Ran and I called a more experienced colleague to get instructions while we rushed to your house. The situation was still unclear then. We were afraid that it might've been a case of murder for money and that the perpetrator might not have gone far. You refused to leave, but it might've been dangerous for a child to be alone under those circumstances."

Fei Du's annoying smirk slowly faded.

"When we arrived, you were sitting just like this on the stone steps at your front garden gate," said Luo Wenzhou. "As soon as you heard our footsteps, you looked up at us. I'll never forget that look in your eyes." That clear, willful, direct gaze had seemed to hold innumerable repressed cries for help and hope, despite the reserved, restrained behavior of the teenager that gaze belonged to. "You reminded me of a story my shifu once told me," Luo Wenzhou continued. "When that old man was younger—maybe twenty years or so ago—he had a missing-children case. A bunch of kids went missing, all girls about ten years old who'd finished school for the day, then never gotten home. They disappeared without a trace. Back then, the technical abilities and standards of the country's criminal investigation units were limited. They barely knew what DNA was; even verifying the deceased's identity required a combination of blood-type testing and family identification of specific physical traits. The disappearances were never

solved—that became a cold case. None of the six little girls were ever found. One victim's father couldn't bear it. He broke down."

Fei Du didn't interrupt. He listened quietly.

"He visited the bureau over a hundred times, but it never came to anything. That wasn't their only case, after all. When so much time passed without a breakthrough, they had to shift their focus to other cases. So they sent out a smooth-talking, experienced criminal investigation officer—my shifu—to deal with that persistent father. They were in touch with each other a lot, and my shifu felt bad for him. Sometimes he advised the man to look ahead; if he really couldn't get over losing a child, he should have another while he and his wife were still young enough. But the victim's father wouldn't listen. He figured that, if nobody else would investigate, he'd do it himself. Then, months later, he appeared out of the blue and grabbed my shifu. He told him he'd found the culprit."

At this point, Luo Wenzhou paused and turned to look Fei Du in the eye. Fei Du really had grown into his features. His eyes were the same shape as when he was younger, but his gaze itself had changed; at some point, it had turned lazy, always half lidded. Even when he wasn't smiling, the corners of his eyes had a mischievous tilt. Sometimes, when he smiled politely at someone, his eyes didn't even focus, instead filling with casual indifference.

The stubborn, almost obsessive gaze of yesteryear had disappeared without a trace. It seemed to exist only in Luo Wenzhou's mind now, an illusion borne of his presumptions about the young man.

He stared at Fei Du for a long time, spacing out, and Fei Du couldn't resist saying something to put him off. Sweeping a wicked look over Luo

Wenzhou's nose and lips, he lowered his voice. "Sergeant Luo, you can't pretend to be naive at your age. Don't you know that staring at someone like that for so long usually means that you're asking for a kiss?"

Luo Wenzhou was too battle-worn to be disgusted. Collecting himself, he retorted unblinkingly, "If I wanted a kiss, it wouldn't be yours, you little brat."

Both of them abruptly sensed a new battle brewing between them. But since Tao Ran wasn't present to mediate, and since the rain was penning them in on all sides under that single umbrella, they were forced to behave with maturity. Each man took a step back, turning away and shutting his mouth.

Having dodged a spat, however, they couldn't very well sit there staring in silence. Fei Du tried to speak civilly. "So what's the connection between that missing-children case and myself?" he asked, his tone apathetic.

"My shifu described the look in that father's eyes to me. He said they were like ice-cold caverns with twin flames of desperate, soul-eating desire within. When I looked at you, for some reason, I thought of that."

Hearing this, Fei Du snorted, momentarily forgetting their ceasefire. He raised one long, slender brow. "You either have bad eyesight or an overactive imagination."

"Fei-zong, is it a tall order for you to stop picking fights for just ten minutes?" Luo Wenzhou asked, staring at him.

"Okay, fine." Fei Du shrugged. "What happened then? Didn't you say the father identified a suspect?"

Seeing Fei Du rein himself in, Luo Wenzhou dropped the argument and returned to the conversation. “He said it was a well-known middle school teacher, someone so famously good that he’d received an award for his charitableness. He’d even received the title of model worker. My shifu thought the girl’s father had lost his mind, but he went and looked into it anyway.”

“Secretly?”

“Yes. If those kinds of rumors surface about a male teacher, it doesn’t matter whether he’s innocent—he’s finished. So my shifu had to investigate in secret. But after all that sleuthing, he didn’t find anything suspicious. Rather, he felt the father was getting unstable. The two of them parted on bad terms. And not long after that…came a murder case. The father stabbed the teacher with a watermelon knife.”

Fei Du didn’t know how to respond to such a tragic tale. After a long moment, he recovered his wits enough to say, “Ha. Don’t worry—I won’t stab anyone myself. People like me tend to hire hit men.”

This time, Luo Wenzhou ignored his goading. “The scary thing is, when they looked into the victim, they found the missing girls’ clothes in his basement, along with an unconscious little girl.”

Drowned out by the rain, Luo Wenzhou heaved a long, quiet sigh. He remembered the warning his shifu had repeatedly given him: *If someone gives you that look, it means they’re counting on you. No matter what, never, ever betray that trust.*

Judging by Fei Du’s expression, he wasn’t particularly moved by this urban-legend-like story. Instead, he asked curiously, “You have a shifu?”

“Yes. An old hand who supervised us when we first started out,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I don’t know whether Tao Ran ever mentioned it to you, but he died a few years ago, chasing down criminals.”

Fei Du hesitated, frowning and mulling this over. “Three years ago?”

“How did you know?”

“Because I don’t remember it,” he replied. “My dad’s accident happened three years ago, so I was dealing with a lot. That was the only time in the past seven years when I didn’t have much contact with Tao Ran.”

At this, Luo Wenzhou felt a strange urge seize him. “Are you actually into Tao Ran?” he blurted out.

Fei Du was sitting in a relaxed pose, his legs crossed and his fingers on his knees. His eyes curved up in a smile at Luo Wenzhou’s words. “Why? Want to fight me? Tao Ran’s already preparing to get married.”

Luo Wenzhou shook his head with a helpless laugh. It felt like everything they’d been through had given him and Fei Du a bond that outweighed their past enmity. He reached unthinkingly for the cigarette pack in his breast pocket, then thought better of it and bottled up the urge with difficulty.

“Go ahead and smoke,” said Fei Du.

“I thought you had a sore throat?”

“No,” Fei Du confessed. “I just wanted a complaint that’d make you uncomfortable.”

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. This kid really was a bastard!

He couldn't resist punching Fei Du, but it turned out that Fei Du was a true gentleman who only fought verbally, never descending to using his fists—and thus was very weak. The uncontrolled punch caught him off guard and threw his elegant, relaxed pose off-balance. One crossed leg splashed into a puddle, and when Fei Du tried to brace himself against the ground to push himself upright, his palm got covered in mud.

Luo Wenzhou wasn't just unapologetic. He found this hilarious and burst into thoughtless laughter. Fei Du didn't even know what to say to this barbarian.

After they'd spent quite some time together in unusual tranquility, the rain finally began to let up. Luo Wenzhou gave the umbrella back to Fei Du. "The renovation work on Tao Ran's new place is done. He's moving in this week. You should come. We can all hang out together."

Fei Du stared at him, silent and expressionless. It struck Luo Wenzhou how similar the young man was to Luo Yiguo. They both had that disdainful look that said, *"The world's full of rabid dogs; I alone stand above it all."* He couldn't help but chuckle as he covered his head and rushed into the light rain.

At that moment, old grudges seemed to disappear like smoke, and something truer came to the fore.

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THE WORK TO WRAP UP the May 20 case and the major corruption case at the Huashi District Bureau proceeded steadily despite their

magnitude. After collecting statements from Wang Hongliang and the others, the police completely eliminated the possibility that He Zhongyi had been involved in drugs. Still, they never managed to find the source of that mysterious text message. Thus, based on the two nearby pinhole cameras, they simply decided the text was something else scripted by the Oscar-worthy Zhao Haochang—though he stubbornly refused to admit it.

Ma Xiaowei was held for a few days, then sent to rehab with Wu Xuechun, ready to strive for a new life. When the car came for them, Luo Wenzhou saw them off himself. Before they left, he nodded at Wu Xuechun and rubbed Ma Xiaowei's buzz cut, as fuzzy as a kiwi. "Now that you've survived this, you have to live well."

When their car disappeared into the distance, Luo Wenzhou stood at the side of the road and lit a cigarette. He sighed, momentarily letting go of the two questions that still poked at him like fish bones in his throat.

Had Chen Zhen's death really been an accident, as Huang Jinglian said?

And how had that ever-mistrustful unlicensed taxi driver delivered a coarse, unpolished report to the city bureau under Wang Hongliang's watchful eye? Wasn't he afraid that the city bureau was in cahoots with Wang Hongliang too?

Luo Wenzhou's hopes of finding the answers to these questions had died with Chen Zhen.

***

As they left, Ma Xiaowei committed the warmth of that young police officer's palm on his scalp to memory. He sat in silence, watching the billboards on either side of the road fly past them.

When they reached a red light, a nondescript sedan stopped next to them. The window rolled down slowly until there was a gap just two fingers wide. Through the gap, a phone screen was visible. It had a privacy screen protector so that the single line of text onscreen could only be seen from Ma Xiaowei's angle:

You've done very well.

Ma Xiaowei's eyes widened. He shuddered. Before he could take a second look at the hand holding the phone, the car's window closed, and the two cars parted at the intersection.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Silent Reading
VOLUME 2

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTER GUIDE

MAIN CHARACTERS

LUO WENZHOU (骆闻舟): Sergeant on Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau's criminal investigation team.

FEI DU (费渡): Rich young chairman of the Fei Corporation, which he inherited when his father suffered an accident that left him comatose.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

YANCHENG MUNICIPAL PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

ZHANG CHUNJIU (张春久): Director general. Nicknamed "Director Gen Zhang."

LU YOULIANG (陆有良): Director General Zhang's deputy.

TAO RAN (陶然): Deputy sergeant on criminal investigation team.

LANG QIAO (朗乔): Member of criminal investigation team. Also called "Er-Lang" and "Xiao-Qiao-er."

HUASHI DISTRICT PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

WANG HONGLIANG (王洪亮): Director.

HUANG JINGLIAN (黄敬廉): Head of criminal investigation team. Wang Hongliang's right-hand man.

XIAO HAIYANG (肖海洋): Bespectacled young officer working under Huang Jinglian. Also called “Little Four-Eyes” and “Xiao-Xiao.”

OTHERS

CHEN ZHEN (陈振): Driver of an unlicensed taxi.

CUI YING (崔颖): Graduate student at West Yancheng University of Political Science and Law.

HE ZHONGYI (何忠义): Murder victim. Out-of-towner who worked in Yancheng to support his sickly mother.

LUO YIGUO (骆一锅): Luo Wenzhou’s cat. Name means “one pot,” a nod to Luo Wenzhou’s initial vow to cook and eat the cat if he was not rehomed.

MA XIAOWEI (马小伟): Young worker from out of town. He Zhongyi’s roommate.

WU XUECHUN (吴雪春): Server at the Grand Luck.

ZHANG DONGLAI (张东来): Wealthy friend of Fei Du’s. Director General Zhang’s nephew.

ZHANG TING (张婷): Zhang Donglai’s sister. Also called “Tingting.”

ZHAO HAOCHANG (赵浩昌): Legal consultant. Zhang Ting’s boyfriend.

ZHAO YULONG (赵玉龙): He Zhongyi’s roommate and friend. From the same province as He Zhongyi.

CHARACTER CONCEPT ART

LUO WENZHOU

CHARACTER CONCEPT ART

FEI DU

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: Suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Affectionate diminutive. Usually applied to monosyllabic names, or one syllable of a multisyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder” that can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: Prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts. Can be used in an affectionate context; not always used literally.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger” that can be added before names or titles for juniors. Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

Family

DI/DIDI: “Younger brother.” Can be used to address a literal brother or unrelated male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: “Elder brother.” Can be used to address a literal brother or unrelated male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: “Elder sister.” Can be used to address a literal sister or unrelated female peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

-XIONG: “Elder brother.” Suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Social Standing and Seniority

LAOSHI: Term of respect for teachers and professionals.

SHIDI: Term for a younger male who studied under the same teacher.

SHIFU: Term for one's teacher or master.

-ZONG: Suffix applied to the names of CEOs or other high-ranking people.

GLOSSARY

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS: The highest-level administrative divisions in the People's Republic of China (PRC) make up the **provincial level (省级, shengji)**. These divisions cover certain large municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai in addition to provinces. The city of Yancheng is implied to be such a provincial-level city.

Provincial-level administrative divisions are subdivided into **prefectural-level (地级, diji)** divisions. Districts in large cities like Beijing and Shanghai fall into this category, as does Yancheng's fictional Huashi District. Below the prefectural level is the **county level (县级, xianji)**, followed by the **township level (乡级, xiangji)**.

PUBLIC SECURITY: The main law-enforcement agency of the PRC is known as the **Ministry of Public Security (公安部, Gong'anbu)**. Police stations within the Ministry of Public Security are stratified according to the same system as administrative divisions:

PROVINCIAL LEVEL: Public Security Department (公安厅, Gong'anting)

MUNICIPAL LEVEL: Public Security Bureau (公安局, Gong'anju)

DISTRICT LEVEL: Public Security District Bureau (公安分局, Gong'anfenju)

SMALLER DIVISIONS: police stations (派出所, paichusuo)

In addition to fighting crime and maintaining order, police—especially those in smaller departments—manage residency and

immigration records. Higher-level departments have more resources to deal with serious crimes.

LAND AND REAL ESTATE: Land in the PRC is owned either by the government (urban land) or by rural collectives (agricultural land). There are strict limits on the use of agricultural land for construction; however, privately owned property may be built on urban land. Home ownership is often considered essential for men seeking marriage.

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] A Song dynasty official known for upholding justice. Usually portrayed with a moon birthmark on his forehead.

[2] Fei Du is listening to Stendhal's The Red and the Black.

Chapter 2

[3] Idyllic mountain in the literary classic Journey to the West (西游记).

[4] Quote from Letters on a Trip to West Hunan (湘行书简) by Shen Congwen.

Chapter 3

[5] The name Tao Ran (陶然) means "joy" or "the appearance of merriness."

Chapter 4

[6] Martial arts technique from the novel The Legend of the Condor Heroes (射雕英雄传) by Jin Yong.

[7] The characters of Yu Lei's name are 于磊.

Chapter 5

[8] In China, 110 is the emergency number for the police.

Chapter 8

[9] A citizen exhibiting behavior aligned with socialist ideals may be recognized as a “model worker” by the government.

Chapter 11

[10] A character from the Yuan dynasty play The Injustice to Dou E (窦娥冤) by Guan Hanqing. She is wrongly convicted of several crimes.

Chapter 12

[11] Quote from the Analects (论语) describing the practices of Confucius.

Chapter 14

[12] The “Five Prohibitions” (五条禁令), issued in 2003, forbid police officers to use guns in violation of regulations, drink while carrying guns, drive under the influence, drink on duty, or gamble.

Chapter 15

[13] Crows traditionally augur ill. Someone who predicts something negative that then comes to pass is said to have “a crow’s mouth.”

[14] Semigovernmental organization that recognizes and rewards brave acts performed by civilians.

[15] Red velvet banners trimmed with gold tassels are a common gift of appreciation for meritorious deeds in China.

Chapter 22

[16] Lang Qiao’s nickname “Er-Lang” (二郎), is both a reference to the god Erlang Shen (二郎神) and an affectionate insult: “Er” (二), meaning “two,” is slang for “silly.”

[17] Korean word for “older brother,” used specifically by girls who are younger. This term has made its way to China through popular media and can be used to refer to any handsome, possibly older, man.

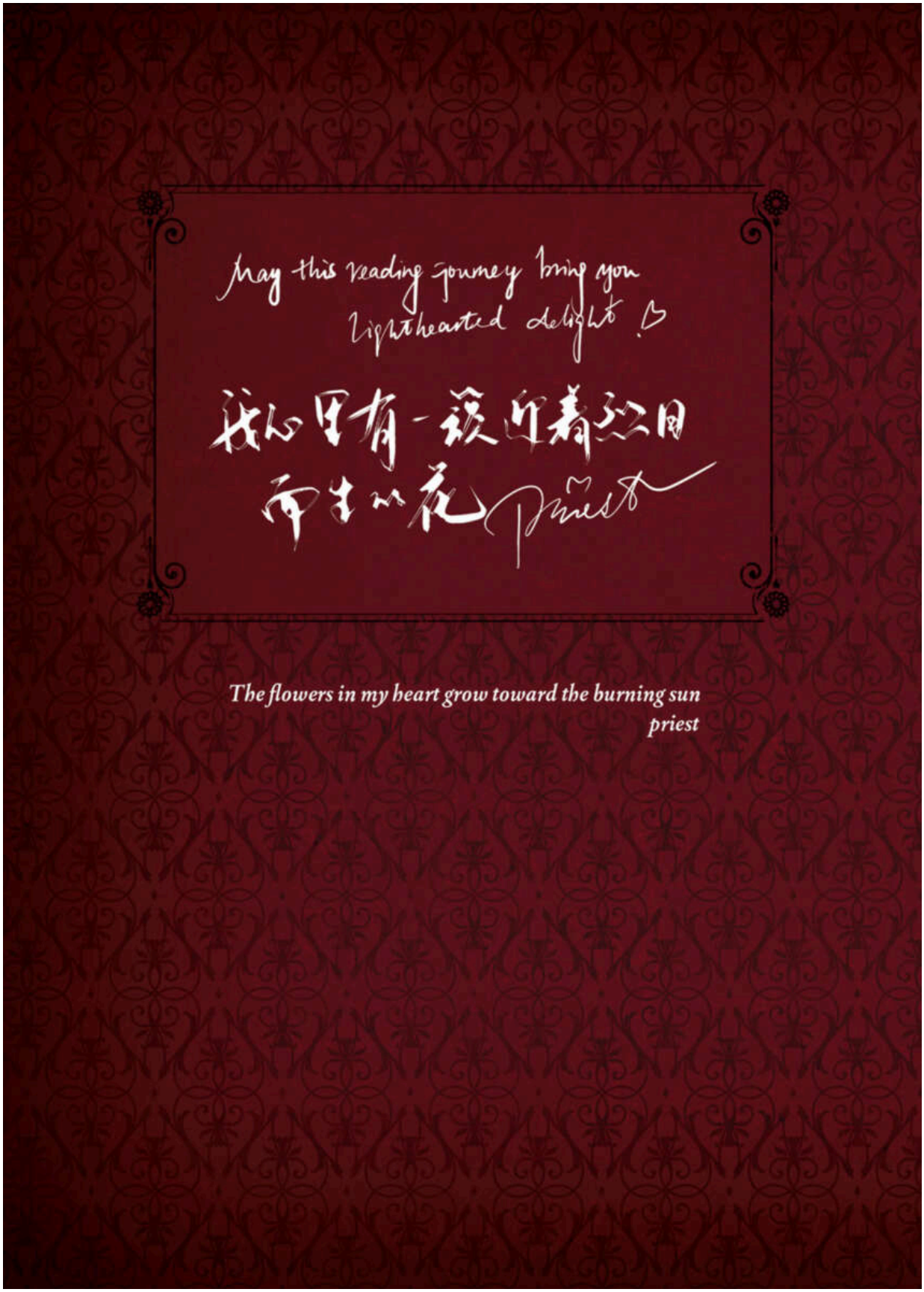
Chapter 23

[18] From Doraemon.

Chapter 24

[19] Legal punishments sometimes include a self-criticism report (检讨书) in which a wrongdoer reflects on themselves and admits guilt.

[20] Used in traditional Chinese medicine.



The flowers in my heart grow toward the burning sun
priest

"You think of murder like a tea party."

A young man's body is found outside a glitzy high-rise on the West Side of Yancheng—dressed for celebration, strangled, and left with a sheet of paper covering his face. One word is scrawled across it: *money*.

To Sergeant Luo Wenzhou, head of the criminal investigation team at the Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau, it's just another case in a city rife with power plays and buried secrets. But as he digs deeper with his team, what begins as a straightforward homicide unravels into something far murkier—reaching into the city's darkest corners of wealth, privilege, and police corruption.

And then there's Fei Du: the aloof, razor-sharp CEO of the Fei Corporation, who seems to know far too much about the murder—and about Luo Wenzhou himself. Once a troubled youth with ties to Luo Wenzhou's past, Fei Du now walks a fine line between brilliant ally and inscrutable suspect. His insights are disturbingly precise. His motives? Frustratingly opaque.

As the investigation twists through layers of trauma and moral ambiguity, Luo Wenzhou finds himself reluctantly drawn toward the very man who unsettles him most. But in a city where justice is easily bought and truth wears many masks, can either man afford to trust the other?

A DANMEI CRIME THRILLER WOVEN WITH MURDER, SUSPENSE, AND INTRIGUE FROM ACCLAIMED AUTHOR PRIEST

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